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M.J. moment

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Week of June 11, 2007

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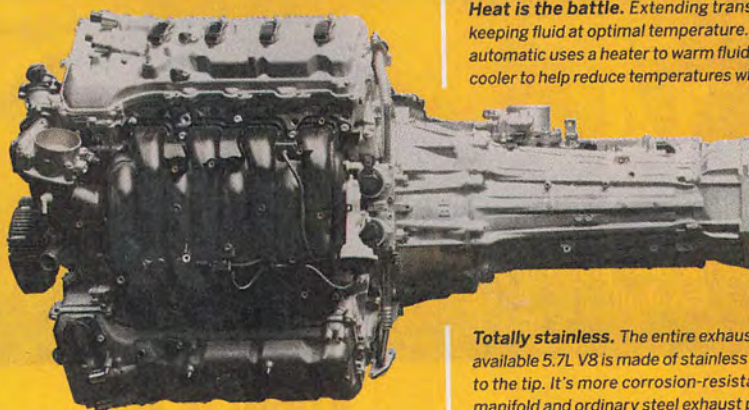
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THE TRUCK THAT'S CHANGING IT ALL.



TUNDRA

SportingNews
MAGAZINE

THIS WEEK

14

Keep your eye on the ball, son,
and maybe one day you, too,
will be the best player in
baseball.

> BASEBALL'S HOT LIST

14 Not your average Joe (or Jose or even Johan)

Mauer, Reyes and Santana rise to the top of our elite panel's dream of a draft. *By Stan McNeal* **Plus**, players and other experts weigh in with their top five in categories ranging from sweetest swings to smartest hitters.

> NFL: OFFSEASON REPORT CARD

28 Big-game hunting

It has been a wild offseason for the Patriots, who wore out their checkbook while the league's other top teams sat on their hands. *By Phil Barber* **Plus**, offseason grades for the 31 teams the Pats hope to leave in the dust when the games begin.

COVER STORY > NBA PLAYOFFS

36 His time is now

You knew LeBron James would get the Cavs to The Finals—you just didn't figure it would be this year or this way. **Plus**, Kobe's franchise-bashing, gum-flapping tirade has the Lakers in crisis mode. *By Sean Deveney*

KNOW IT ALL

- 6 **To Know List** If Michael Vick becomes embroiled in a legal dogfight, NFL commish Roger Goodell will face a sticky situation.
- 8 **On Deck** The College World Series is more fun than you can shake an aluminum bat at. **Plus**, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 10 **A big loss for Gainesville** Poof! Just like Magic, Billy Donovan disappears.
- 12 **Your Turn** A Kobe-Barry bash with a special appearance by Vick.
- 13 **Sports Talk** Al Roker forecasts a Yankee storm and delicious tailgating weather.

INSIDER

- 34 ■ **NHL**
- 36 ■ **NBA**
- 39 ■ **BASEBALL+Fantasy Source**
- 46 ■ **NFL**
- 52 ■ **COLLEGE BASKETBALL**
- 54 ■ **COLLEGE FOOTBALL**
- 55 ■ **NASCAR**
- +
- 60 **EXPOSURE**

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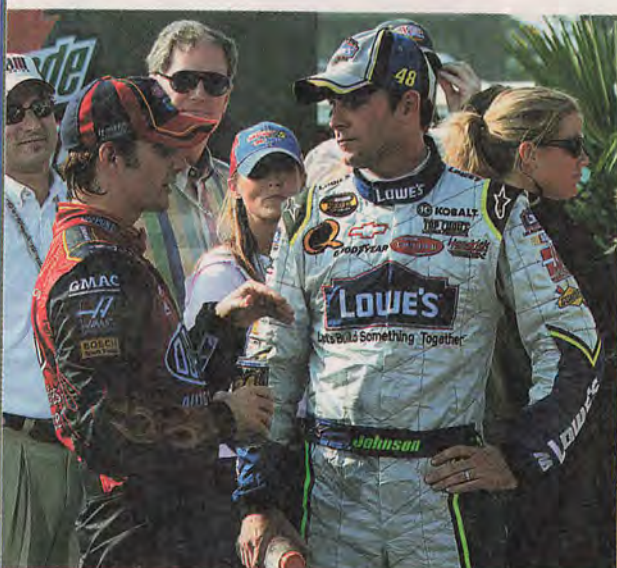


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/NASCAR/ Revving up for the Chase

Sunday's race at Dover completed the first half of the Nextel Cup regular season. That leaves drivers with 13 races to qualify for the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup. Will Hendrick teammates Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson continue to dominate the field? We'll look at how the second half shapes up. Go to: sportingnews.com/nascar.

The Chase spotlight focuses on Gordon (left) and Johnson.

/NBA/ Who's No. 3?

There's not much debate about the first two picks in the NBA draft, but what's going to happen after that? Sean Deveney provides a weekly mock draft leading up to the real thing on June 28. Go to sportingnews.com/experts/sean-deveney.

/HORSE RACING/ The final jewel

There won't be a Triple Crown winner this year, but there will be plenty on the line at Saturday's Belmont Stakes. Brad Telias offers a preview at sportingnews.com/experts/brad-telias.

/FANTASY/ You da (fantasy) man!

Even if you're a real-life hacker, you can rule the course online. Sign up for Fantasy Golf Season 2 and manage a roster of four golfers. It's free to play, and there are basic and pro leagues. Go to fantasygames.sportingnews.com.

/MEMBERS/ Five-star profile



Member name: dave1965
Member since: March 2006
Home state: Connecticut
Favorite teams: Mets, Pats, Isles and Huskies

Least favorite teams: Only one, the Yankees
Fantasy favorites: Baseball, basketball, stock car racing, college hoops and golf

On the negative side of sports: "I watch as players fall and fall hard. Pacman Jones, Tank Johnson and Michael Vick are prime examples. Athletes must be bored with all the money they make. Even if you paid a guy \$100,000 a year, don't you think he would still play football? I would."

On the NHL: "I like it, but I still need time to get back to a full tank. I wasn't happy with the unofficial vacation."

On NASCAR: "The races are too long—make them short and fast."

Come on, now: What's your take on sports? Join our free community and start your blog at members.sportingnews.com/member.

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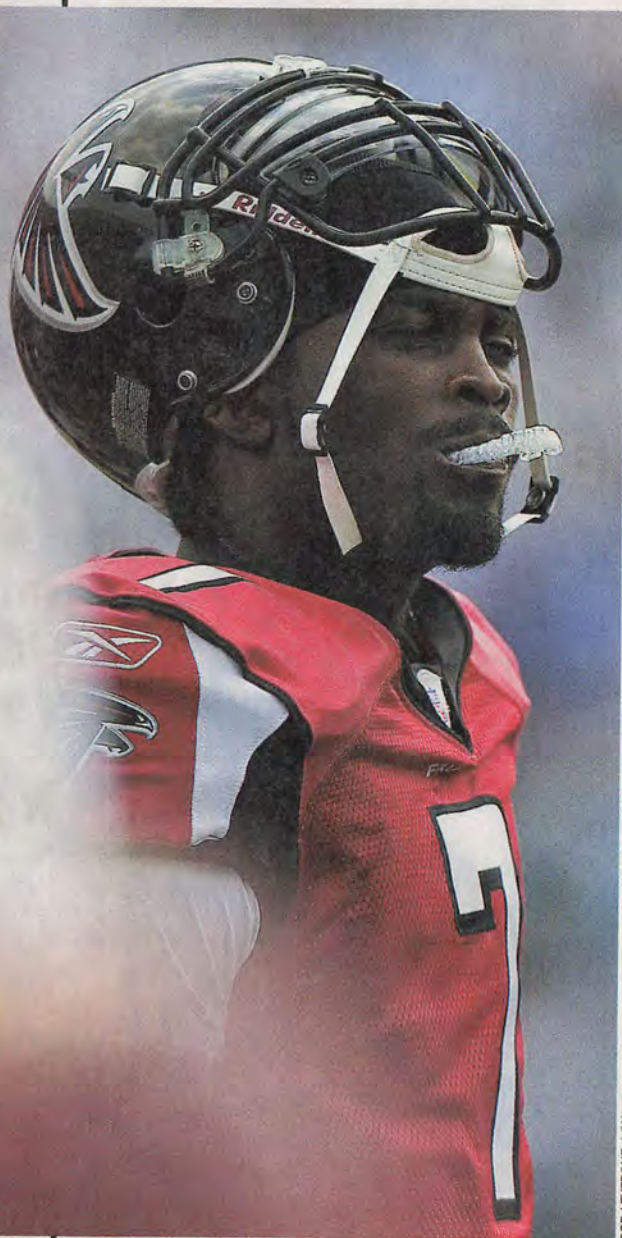
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TO KNOW LIST

7 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1 THE MAIN EVENT

A menacing dog collar



BOB LEVERONE / SN

This isn't O.J. Simpson standing trial for murder. It isn't Mercury Morris selling drugs or Billy Cannon printing fake money. It might not even be Art Schlichter gambling his way into prison and financial ruin.

But dogfighting, in which dogs are bred and trained to rip each other to shreds, is a felony, and Michael Vick is squarely in the cross hairs of Virginia investigators. An indictment would make Vick a defendant in the highest-

This certainly isn't what Roger Goodell needs now. Since taking over as NFL commissioner in September, he has been making all the right moves—coming down hard on the league's criminal element, initiating a conference on concussions, banning alcohol from team functions and so on. Goodell seemed to be making progress—and now this. Pacman Jones has Vick beat volume-

wise, but the ugly nature of dogfighting and Vick's stature in the league make this Goodell's prickliest situation yet.

This isn't what Bobby Petrino needs, either. Vick is one of the league's most exciting players, but his struggles as a passer and Atlanta's mediocre record on his watch have Falcons fans growing restless. The new coach thinks he can fix what ails Vick, but then so did Jim Mora and Dan Reeves. And



JOE FUDGE / DAILY PRESS / AP

The ugly nature of dogfighting and Michael Vick's stature in the league make this Roger Goodell's prickliest situation yet.

profile criminal case involving an NFL star since Ray Lewis was accused of murder seven years ago.

The evidence against Vick is mounting. An April raid of a home he owned in Virginia revealed the presence of dozens of dogs, most of them pit bulls, along with materials that could be associated with dogfighting. Authorities say a line of informants connecting Vick to high-stakes dogfighting is forming. If charged and convicted, he could face five years in prison.

if Vick is out of pocket (come to think of it, when is he in the pocket?), Petrino's Plan B is ... Joey Harrington.

Vick could, as he claims, be totally innocent. Maybe his greatest sin was stupidity—trusting others who did nasty things in his absence. But NFL fans are growing weary of their heroes being linked to criminal activity, and with investigators nipping at Vick's heels, Goodell and Petrino can only hope the face of the Falcons isn't in for a legal dogfight of his own. —Mike Nahrstedt

NEWS YOU CAN'T USE

'So what if we're boring,' Duncan says before taking nap >> Cubs pile in Piniella's basement to watch 'Anger Management' >> Donovan to spring for tacos

2

QUICK CLICKS

They just can't hold it in

"The Brewers make me feel so good about myself—like I'm on the right path now and all the choices I've made were leading me to this moment," explains the webmaster of peeyourpantsforthebrewers.com. The site is an expression of love, and, well, let's just call it enthusiastic support for the unlikely division leader in the big leagues. Lest you assume otherwise, PYPFB is a pretty clean site, too. And funny. To date, more than 5,200 Brewers die-hards have pledged to PTP if the Brewers make the playoffs for the first time in a quarter-century; one of them describes the best part of being a Brewers fan as, "At 220 pounds, I'm in the lightweight division." Thin, fat, really fat—these days, all Brewers fans are tasting the good life. —Steve Greenberg



Look, just do us a favor and wait until you get home, OK?

3

IT BEARS REPEATING

'There is obviously demand for top-level professional football. The NFL wants and needs competition.'

—Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban on his website, *Blogmaverick.com*. Cuban is part of a group that is considering launching a rival pro football league called the UFL. The league would play on Friday nights.

4

LIFESTYLES

Health Nats

Alcoholic beverages are not the only things that have been banned from the Nationals' clubhouse. The team also got rid of snacks such as M&Ms, Milky Way bars, Twinkies and Skittles. In are fruits, walnuts, carrots and a salad bar. Fried chicken also has been banned from the premises. Instead, the team will feast on rotisserie chicken. According to general manager Jim Bowden, the idea came from players Brian Schneider and John Patterson, who felt it was time for the team to eat healthier. —MLB.com



5

YOU HEARD IT HERE

'Kevin Durant can pretty much play any position he wants to.'

—Trail Blazers coach Nate McMillan, on *Sporting News Radio's Tim Brando Show*



6

GET IT BEFORE IT'S HOT

Legends of the ball

Take a deep breath, Cubs fans. Turn away from the tirades and the tussles and relive some of the finer moments in Cubs history with the **Chicago Cubs Legends: Great Games Collector's Edition** (\$84.99, in stores). The DVD set devotes a disc each to eight of the biggest stars in team history. Watch Ryne Sandberg's 7-RBI game in 1984, Sammy Sosa's 62nd home run or Kerry Wood's 20-strikeout performance—anything but what's going on at Wrigley these days.

Also newly available is the **Baltimore Orioles Legends: Cal Ripken Jr. Collector's Edition** (\$59.95, in stores). The six-disc set includes highlights from Ripken's All-Star appearances, his 6-for-6 game against the Braves in 1999 and, of course, the night he broke Lou Gehrig's storied consecutive games record.

—Tricia Garner



7

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: SPURS FORWARD ROBERT HORRY

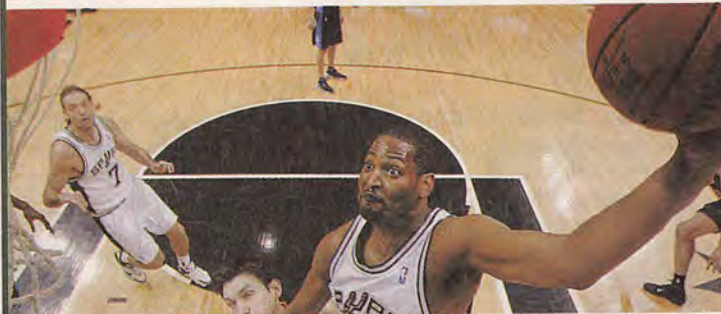
Bob has some big shots left

Back in the first round of the playoffs, with the Spurs leading the Nuggets by one late in Game 4, Robert Horry, 36, did the one thing that has kept him in the league over the past few years—he made a backbreaking 3-pointer. "He's been known to do that," deadpanned Spurs coach Gregg Popovich.

Indeed, from his first Finals game-winning 3-pointer (as a member of the Rockets in 1995, when his shot with time running out beat the Magic) to his last (in overtime to beat the Pistons during Game 5 in 2005), Horry has been a late-game fixture in The Finals. But he has struggled since his two-game suspension in the conference semifinals—he shot just 22.2 percent against Utah in the West finals.

Still, the Cavaliers, according to one scout, would be wise not to leave Horry alone with a game in the balance. "I just get the feeling he is due to win them a game with a 3, don't you?" the scout says. "Every now and then, he needs to remind us all why he's still in the league."

—Sean Deveney



He's not the main event, but Bob usually provides a killer sideshow.

ON DECK

The week ahead in sports



Pop that jab, Zab—just don't try to hide behind Pop.

FRANK FRANKLIN II / AP

THIS I GOTTA SEE All times Eastern

SAT 9 Miguel Cotto vs. Zab Judah (9 p.m., HBO Pay-Per-View). Judah sneakily tried to have his dad fill in for him on a prefight teleconference. But with the world welterweight title on the line against the unbeaten Cotto at Madison Square Garden, here's guessing Zab won't be a no-show for this one.



TY RUSSELL / AP

PICK of the WEEK

What's more fun than baseball in Omaha?

FRI 15 College World Series (2 p.m. and 7 p.m., ESPN2). Break out the rally caps, boys! Eight teams and their adoring fans take over Rosenblatt Stadium with more gusto than you can shake an aluminum stick at.

SUN 10 French Open men's final (9 a.m., NBC). So, the Americans didn't do us all proud. But couldn't we just pretend that, say, Roger Federer is one of us for a day?

TUE 12 U.S. Open preview (3 p.m., ESPN). Get in a practice round of your weekend viewing pleasure with a look at the guys who are the best bets to kick the Oakmont (Pa.) Country Club right in the back nine.

WED 13 Mariners-Cubs (8 p.m., WGN). OK, it's probably not a World Series preview. But watching Ichiro roam Wrigley Field in front of his former manager isn't a bad way to spend the evening.

THU 14 NBA Finals (9 p.m., ABC). It's Game 4, which means there's at least a chance this is the last NBA game of the season. Boy, and it seems like these playoffs started just yesterday. —*Kyle Veltrap*



LIONEL CIRONEAU / AP

See that red and white on Federer's racket? That's good enough for us!

COMING AT YOU

In the June 18 issue

The All-American Fan Poll. You've been voting at sportingnews.com for weeks—it's time to see how your predictions for the coming 12 months in sports compare to ours. (Just how many games will those wacky Red Sox win, anyway?) The fun will be only beginning, of course, because we'll track our answers and yours all year to see who really knows their stuff. In the meantime, how 'bout we all agree not to get too cocky. Deal?

- What makes the Spurs tamale-hot every year at this time?
- If there's a Cupful of NHL championship coverage to hoist, we'll be only too pleased to skate it around the ice.



BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The NBA Finals. The Spurs made it look so easy, Kobe can't decide whether to demand a trade to San Antonio or just blame the Alamo on the Lakers' front office and leave it at that.

2 Hendrick Motorsports. Used to be a team that dominated like this would've been called "the New York Yankees of NASCAR." Now? NASCAR's calling the Yankees "strictly Busch league."

3 The N.L. Central. At one point last week, it was close to being a collective 40 games under .500, or as it's known within the division: the Narron line.

4 The French Open. Frankly, this event sneaks up on me every year. I'm barely ready to not care about it, especially since I've been so busy not caring about hockey.

5 Barry Bonds. I don't begrudge him hoarding his memorabilia. Especially because I was the winning bidder on eBay for that game-worn chip on his shoulder.

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A big loss for Gainesville

Hotter-than-hot hoops coach **Billy Donovan** is off to Orlando. Just where does that leave the Gators?



JOHN BAZEMORE / AP

All that's left of Florida's consecutive NCAA basketball championships are the matching trophies and perhaps an unswept piece of confetti here or there.

Two seniors completed their careers. Four juniors entered the NBA draft. Now, the coach who brought them all together and forged these Gators into one of college basketball's greatest teams is leaving to cash one of those only-in-the-NBA paychecks.

Billy Donovan is gone to coach the Orlando Magic. Replacing him at Florida is no less attractive a prospect than becoming Jennifer Aniston's second husband.

Florida moved quickly to pursue former assistant Anthony Grant, who won 28 games as Virginia Commonwealth's coach last season. This is only the fourth time in the past 32 years of college basketball that someone has been asked to take over for a coach who had just completed a championship season and the first time someone has had to follow a coach who had won two. That standard is the most daunting aspect of the Florida job.

Had Donovan remained at Florida, though, no one would have expected the Gators to make it three in a row. The leading returning scorer, guard Walter Hodge, averaged just 5.7 points. But Hodge is a decent player, and center Marreese Speights is an outstanding prospect. Pre-

suming no one will want to abandon his letter of intent, there is an excellent five-man recruiting class in place, led by McDonald's All American guard Nick Calathes.

Florida was a pioneer in building a palatial practice facility, which is no surprise given athletic director Jeremy Foley's record of producing success across his entire department. Foley's extraordinary vision has included the willingness to make Donovan the highest-paid coach in college basketball—there was a \$3.5 million salary offer on the table when the Magic trumped it—which is going to be attractive to his successor.

Grant impressed Foley while serving as the Gators' top recruiter and impressed most everyone in college basketball as he led VCU to an NCAA Tournament upset of traditional power Duke.

No one will have an easy time replacing Donovan. Grant could do well, but he does not have Donovan's force of personality and would have to discover whether he can handle criticism and remain as balanced as his former boss always was. Expect the balance of power in the SEC to shift at least slightly back toward Kentucky and new coach Billy Gillispie over the next few years.

A coach must work hard—just ask Donovan—to make a school like Florida a basketball champion. If it's been done, though, who's to say it can't be done again? —Mike DeCourcy

There's no magic formula for success in the NBA

One might think there are only 27.5 million reasons for Billy Donovan to leave Florida and become coach of the Magic, but that would not be entirely accurate. There are at least 27,500,001 reasons to take the job.

There's the money.

And there's Dwight Howard.

With Howard stationed at the center of the Magic lineup, Donovan will enjoy a luxury no other college coach had in attempting the climb to the NBA during the past decade. Howard is one of the elite players in the league, particularly in the under-25 age group. He is a powerful inside presence and is the kind of player teams long to build a franchise around.

A lack of team talent was the primary element in crushing every college coach who recently made this move and soon found himself fired.

At 6-11, Howard got the Magic 17.6 points and 12.3 rebounds per game last season. He has increased his scoring and shooting percentages every year in the league. He is a high-character, non-nonsense performer. Going from coaching a gem like Al Horford to working with this guy is almost unfair to all the coaches who have to deal with so many crumbs. —M.D.

It takes one to know one

College coaching star—and former NBA coaching, uh, nonstar—John Calipari offers his top three tips to Donovan for making the transition to the NBA:

1 "Hire people to do the other stuff. You coach the team."

2 "The most important relationship is with the owner. All the other stuff does not matter. In pro sports, it's the owner one, the owner two, the owner three."

3 "The way you've played at Florida—spacing the court, the dribble drives, pick-and-rolls—don't act like you can't play that way. Do what you do."



MICHAEL CONROY / AP

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The Pilot  **HONDA**

honda.com 1-800-33-Honda EX-L model shown. ©2006 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

YOUR TURN

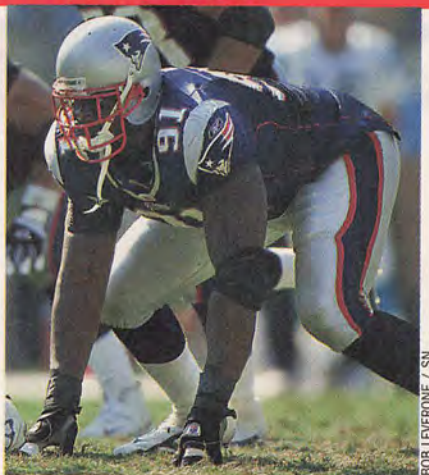
You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.

What a sad loss. Marquise Hill's humanity will be greatly missed.

—weathersusa via SportingNews.com

■ What loyalty has Kobe Bryant ever shown to the Lakers, who stood by him throughout his rape trial? He's 28, and he can't go through some lean years so the team can develop? No one worth anything in the league wants to play with him. —finkle is einhorn via SportingNews.com

■ Right now, the Lakers are in the same predicament as Minnesota: They are stuck in mediocrity mode. The Lakers, as they are, will always play .500 ball. Unfortunately, they have no real assets to trade and will never be in position to improve through the draft. The best thing they could do is trade Kobe for some good young players with potential and a bunch of draft picks. —phosrik via SportingNews.com



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Hill, a national champion at LSU before joining the Patriots, drowned last week in a jet ski accident.



PAUL CONNORS / AP

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'The NBA conference finals were beyond boring. Kobe Bryant's offseason is more interesting than the NBA's postseason!'

—Craig in Philadelphia on the Tony Bruno Show

■ Bryant created this mess, and now he wants out. If I were the G.M. of the Lakers, I would send him to the crappiest team out there. —Bballpunk99 via SportingNews.com

■ Sure, Hank Aaron will lose his home run record to Barry Bonds (SN, May 28), but he has one thing Bonds never will: class! —Dean Franza, Milwaukee

■ Barry Bonds won't answer questions, but how would Bonds feel if reporters didn't feed his ego and showed no interest at all in interviewing him? —Buck Cooler, Alamogordo, N.M.

■ The real test of Jeff Gordon's season (SN, May 21) will come during the Chase. If he can duplicate the run he's had so far, he will win the championship. —hotwheels0269 via SportingNews.com

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

Posted by tomaindenver

As I've watched the Red Sox run out to a double-digit lead over the Yankees in the standings, I've had a scary thought: The teams have switched personas from the 1970s. The Yankees are now the team that has to score six runs every night just to be in the game. And the Red Sox are the team that has the pitching that puts them above their rivals.

RE: NOT IMPRESSED

Posted by Parkov

Michael Vick has got to be kidding me. Or Ron Mexico or whatever name he's going by today. I don't know if the accusations against him are true, but I have no respect for anyone who engages in dogfighting. It's a cruel, stupid and illegal thing to do.

RE: BRING THE SEXY BACK

Posted by zetterberg01

I was 8 years old when my dad first bought season tickets to the Red Wings. Even though the team was horrible, there was excitement in the building every night. That excitement is completely gone from the NHL. The Ducks and Senators in the finals—how many people really care?

POLLING PLACE

Is this Tim Duncan's last trip to The Finals with the Spurs?



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We are the champions again ... and again ... and again.

Sports talk with Al Roker

America's favorite weatherman; executive producer of *The Show* (Wednesdays at 10 p.m. ET on MOJO)

SN: What sort of storm will we be looking at when the Yankees finish 20 games behind the Red Sox?

ROKER: Whoa boy, I can't even begin to imagine it. It would be, like, the perfect storm. George Steinbrenner and Joe Torre and just a lot of angry, ugly fans. Well, I don't mean *ugly* fans.

SN: I'm pretty sure Matt Lauer is a SPORTING NEWS subscriber. Safe to say he talks incessantly about us to anyone who will listen?

ROKER: You can't shut him up. Sometimes you just want to hit him with a Taser. Enough about the SPORTING NEWS—please! You're a newsman, for God's sake.

SN: You hosted a special on tailgating for the Food Network. Are you really more of a bratwurst guy than a caviar guy?

ROKER: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I like red meat. To me, heaven is a 2½-inch bone-in ribeye over a charcoal fire. Just a little salt, a little pepper ...

mmm.

SN: Do you ever feel

like if only you'd taken Ron Dayne with you to get gastric bypass surgery in 2002, he'd be leading the NFL in rushing with the Giants every year?

ROKER: You know, everybody must come to their own path. I came to mine. Ron will come to his.

SN: Let's talk about *The Show*.

ROKER: We followed six Tucson Sidewinders (the Diamondbacks' Class AAA affiliate) last season to see if they could make it to "the show." Out of the six, three of them made it and one of

them, Carlos Quentin, became a major star last year. It's about living a dream. When do you say "enough"? When is the dream over? It can be a hard thing to face.

SN: When did Al Roker's sports

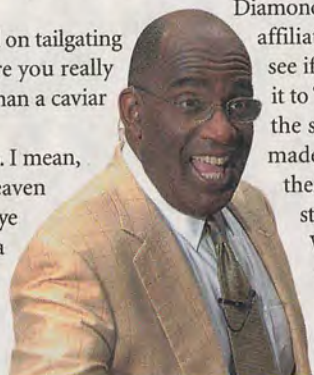


ROY DABNER / AP

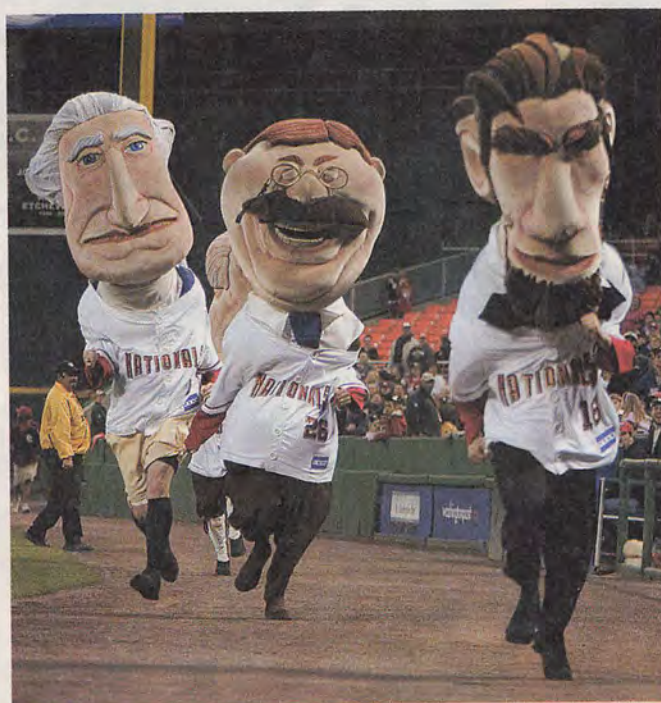
Quentin is a real snake in the grass—first a Sidewinder, now an everyday outfielder with the Diamondbacks.

dream die?

ROKER: I didn't have one. Maybe just trying to avoid getting out in dodgeball. There was a split shorts incident that we won't go into. Needless to say, a couple of witnesses are still in therapy. —Steve Greenberg



JENNIFER GRAYLOCK / AP



BOB LEVERONE / SN

NO PREZ-URE It was a furious race to the finish line for these staunch Nats backers, but in the end, a long strider called Honest Abe abolished the competition.

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NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE (OR JOSE OR EVEN JOHAN)

Mauer, Reyes and Santana rise to the top in our elite panel's dream of a draft *By Stan McNeal*

Around this time every year, SPORTING NEWS turns to the real experts—paid talent evaluators—to assist us in compiling our Hot List of baseball's best players. This year, we consulted a dozen experts—four general managers, an assistant G.M., six big league scouts and, for a twist, a Hall of Fame writer. The group featured a couple of old school types and a couple of guys who are more interested in statistics. (See how we ran the draft on Page 17.) As always, some of the results were revealing.

These evaluators, for example, consider Johan Santana the game's best pitcher, Vladimir Guerrero the best right fielder, Alex Rodriguez the top third baseman and David Ortiz the No. 1 designated hitter.

Even the sap buried in last place in your fantasy league could have told us that, right? OK, maybe so. But let's see if

THE FIRST TEAM



RON VESELY / MLB PHOTOS / GETTY IMAGES

2 Jose Reyes, SS, Mets. Has increased his walks over the past three seasons from 27 to 53 to on-pace for 91. Already is considered the best leadoff hitter in the N.L.—and the most exciting player to watch.

1 Joe Mauer, C, Twins. His 3.83 catcher's ERA since 2005 is the best among A.L. regulars. A history of injuries scared off no one; Mauer was the most sought-after player.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

3 Johan Santana, SP, Twins. Leads A.L. pitchers in wins, innings pitched, ERA and strikeouts over the past three seasons. Won two of the past three A.L. Cy Young awards, both times unanimously.



TED S. WARREN / AP

BASEBALL'S BEST PLAYERS

any of this analysis passed on by the evaluators enlightens you:

Did you know the best catcher may be too tall for the position? That the best shortstop in New York also is the best shortstop in baseball and his name is not Derek Jeter? That the way to build a team is up the middle? That some guy nicknamed Pronk is pushing Ortiz for No. 1 DH honors?

Still not impressed? You know Joe Mauer, Jose Reyes and even Travis Hafner without even peeking at your *Baseball Register*. All right, then. You must be ready for some *real* insight. And here it is. The focus is on Mauer, Santana (and his challengers) and Reyes, with additional inside information on Ichiro Suzuki's free-agent appeal as a center fielder, the changing of the guard among closers, the American League's edge over the National and the emphasis on offense in today's game.

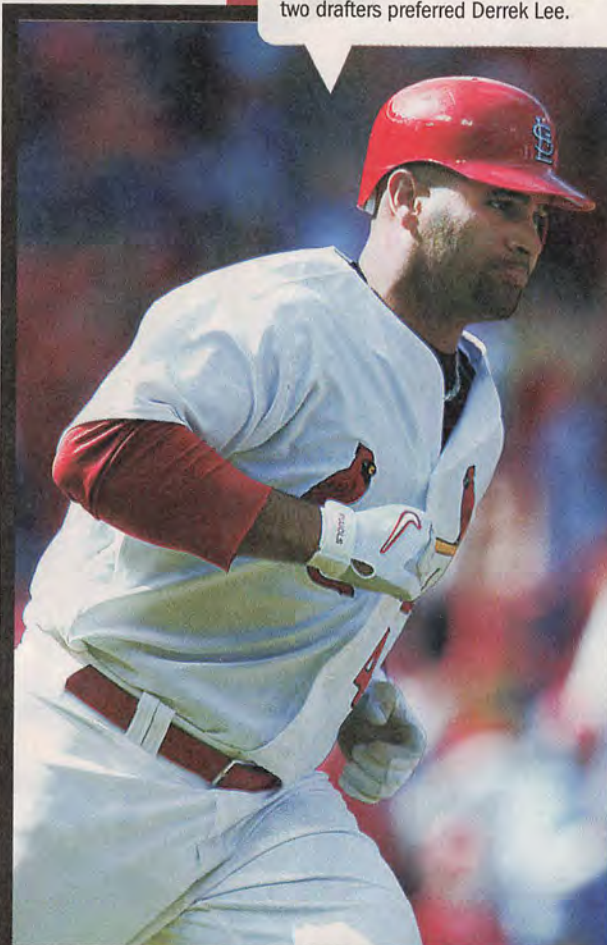
■ The Twins' Mauer is not only the game's best catcher but the guy most of our evaluators—six of the 12—would choose as the player to build a franchise around. Three reasons besides the fact he's only 24:

1. Offense. Whether you prefer average or on-base percentage, Mauer is your man. Last year, he became the first catcher to win an A.L. batting championship, hitting .347, and his career OBP is .403. The best news: The evaluators believe he'll be good for 30 homers a year in another season or two. "When a young (lefthanded) hitter can hit to the gap in left-center like Mauer, the thinking is he'll learn to pull the ball, and when he does, his power numbers will go up," one evaluator says. 2. Defense. He's athletic, has a strong arm and calls a good game. His only weakness is his height because, at 6-5, he can make calling low strikes difficult for the umpire trying to see over him. Seriously. 3. No other catcher is in his class. Sorry, Pudge Rodriguez fans. Pudge didn't get a mention as a top two catcher from our consultants.

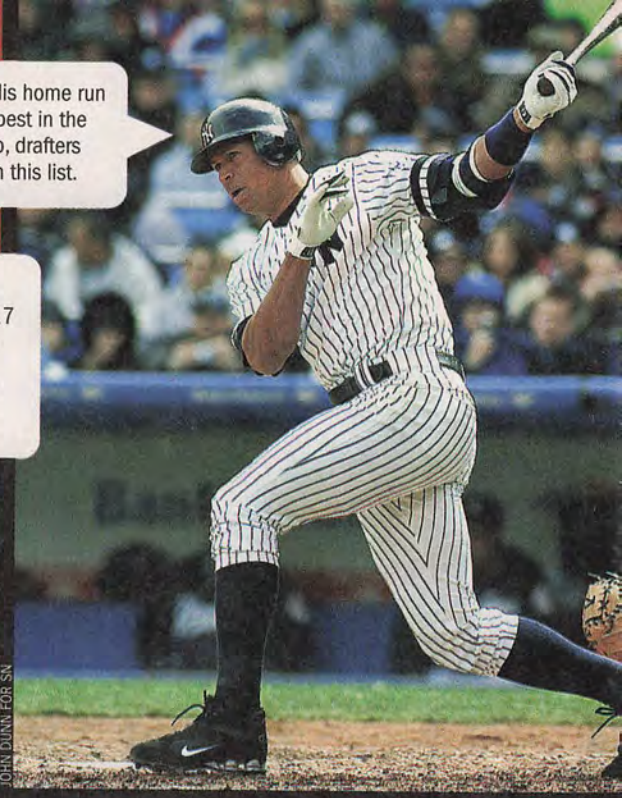
■ Among the game's standout pitchers,

4 Alex Rodriguez, 3B, Yankees. His home run and RBI averages are the majors' best in the 21st century. If he still played shortstop, drafters say he would have been even higher on this list.

5 Albert Pujols, 1B, Cardinals. Figures of .314, 34 homers and 117 RBIs are the worst he has put up in each category in his first six seasons. His slow '07 start cost him some buzz; two drafters preferred Derrek Lee.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN



JOHN DUNN FOR SN



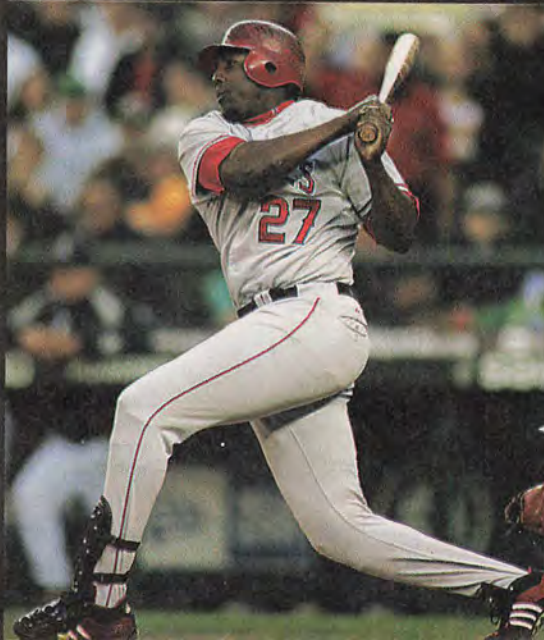
ALBERT DICKSON / SN

6 David Ortiz, DH, Red Sox.

Leads the majors in home runs, RBIs and go-ahead RBIs since the start of 2005. If rankings were based solely on offense, he would have been no worse than No. 3 behind Rodriguez and Pujols.

7 Vladimir Guerrero, RF, Angels.

As usual, he ranks among the A.L. leaders in average, home runs and slugging. His range in the field has slipped a notch, but his hitting—including his uncanny plate coverage—has not.



TED S. WARREN / AP

8 Carlos Beltran, CF, Mets. Not yet on pace to duplicate his huge '06 numbers of 41 homers and 116 RBIs, but his production is still among the best at his position. One of the toughest positions to call.



9 Chase Utley, 2B, Phillies. Name the stat—runs, hits, home runs, RBIs, average, on-base percentage, slugging—and he's No. 1 at his position since the start of 2006. In addition to his offense, scouts rave about his makeup. Has made himself an adequate defender.

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

10 Jonathan Papelbon, CL, Red Sox. His 1.12 ERA and .166 batting average against are the best among closers the past two seasons. If there were a greater difference between the effectiveness of Papelbon and Joe Nathan and Francisco Rodriguez, Papelbon surely would have been selected earlier in the draft. Drafters knew a great closer would be available late, though.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN



11 Alfonso Soriano, LF, Cubs. Went from 36 homers, 30 steals in 2005 to 46-41 last season, but the 50-50 club isn't likely after a power outage so far this season. Left and center were the only positions where the choice was not unanimous or almost unanimous. Barry Bonds was chosen in two drafts.

How the selection process worked

To determine the Dream Teams, SPORTING NEWS conducted nine mock drafts with certified baseball experts. SN's representative went head to head in separate sessions with four major league general managers, an assistant G.M., three big league scouts and one Hall of Fame writer.

The ground rules for each draft went like this: In most cases, the expert made the first selection overall. Whenever a player from a position was chosen, the next pick had to be a player who manned the same position, and the draft followed the "snaking" process in which one party made a pick, the other party got two choices and the first party followed with two more. And on it went.

Once all the drafts were finished, SN sifted through the results and came up with consensus winners and runners-up at each position and a consensus draft slot in which a player was taken. (Those draft positions are indicated by the numbers that accompany players' names on the Dream Teams.)

The example draft below was typical in that it showed the importance of building a team up the middle. In fact, in all nine drafts, the No. 1 pick was a catcher, shortstop or starting pitcher. Conversely, this example was atypical because the executive doing the picking was the only one to choose Roy Oswalt and Justin Morneau.

Executive

1. Joe Mauer, C

4. Roy Oswalt, SP

5. Jose Reyes, SS

8. Grady Sizemore, CF

9. Chase Utley, 2B

12. Miguel Cabrera, 3B

13. Vladimir Guerrero, RF

16. Justin Morneau, 1B

17. Jonathan Papelbon, CL

20. Travis Hafner, DH

21. Barry Bonds, LF

Sporting News

2. Brian McCann, C

3. Johan Santana, SP

6. Hanley Ramirez, SS

7. Carlos Beltran, CF

10. Orlando Hudson, 2B

11. Alex Rodriguez, 3B

14. Magglio Ordonez, RF

15. Albert Pujols, 1B

18. Joe Nathan, CL

19. David Ortiz, DH

22. Matt Holliday, LF

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

JAY DROWNS / SN

righthanders Josh Beckett and Roy Halladay received high marks. Beckett's start (8-0, 2.65 ERA) is not a real surprise. In his second season with the Red Sox, he has adjusted to the A.L. as many evaluators said he would. "He has a chance to throw a no-hitter every time out," one G.M. says. "I really think this is the year he comes into his own," another says. One statistic that sums up Beckett '06 vs. '07: After serving up 36 home runs last season, he has allowed only

two in his first nine starts.

The Blue Jays' Halladay is revered by evaluators and by opponents. "I haven't seen Halladay pitch that much, but whenever I talk to players about him, they say he is the man," one G.M. says. Halladay has that bulldog quality scouts love to see in an ace. "His stuff is nasty, but what separates him for me is the way he always wants

the ball," an evaluator says.

As highly regarded as Beckett and Halladay are, our guys agreed that the gap between Santana and No. 2 is as large as the difference between the Red Sox and Royals. "The complete package," says a major league scout of the Min-

THE SECOND TEAM

1 Josh Beckett, SP, Red Sox

Others considered: Roy Halladay, Blue Jays; Roy Oswalt, Astros; Justin Verlander, Tigers; C.C. Sabathia, Indians; Felix Hernandez, Mariners.

Scout says: "Sabathia has become an ace. They've been using him every fifth day, skipping their fifth starter when they can. You can see he understands, and wants, that responsibility."

Not a mention: Jake Peavy, Padres; Brandon Webb, Diamondbacks.

2 Grady Sizemore, CF, Indians

Others considered: Andruw Jones, Braves; Ichiro Suzuki, Mariners; Nick Swisher, A's.

Scout says: "There's no player I'd rather watch than Sizemore."

Not a mention: Torii Hunter, Twins.

4 Derrek Lee, 1B, Cubs

Others considered: Justin Morneau, Twins; Todd Helton, Rockies; Carlos Delgado, Mets.

Scout says: "It's hard to overlook Pujols, and I like the way Lee has been hitting."

Not a mention: Adrian Gonzalez, Padres.

5 Magglio Ordonez, RF, Tigers

Others considered: Lance Berkman, Astros (scout points out "he used to play there a lot"); Bobby Abreu, Yankees.

Scout says: "Ordonez has been carrying them with his hot bat."

Not a mention: J.D. Drew, Red Sox.

6 Brian McCann, C, Braves

Others considered: Russell Martin, Dodgers; Victor Martinez, Indians; Yadier Molina, Cardinals.

Scout says: "McCann has worked hard to become a better receiver, but he's just not as athletic as Mauer. Not as athletic, doesn't throw as well. His swing has a bit more loft, so he should hit more home runs."

Not a mention: Pudge Rodriguez, Tigers.

7 Travis Hafner, DH, Indians

Others considered: Jim Thome, White Sox.

Scout says: "Ortiz is the guy, but you couldn't go wrong with Hafner."

Not a mention: Frank Thomas, Blue Jays.

8 Miguel Cabrera, 3B, Marlins

Others considered: David Wright, Mets.

Scout says: "Cabrera is a good hitter, but they're going to have to watch him. If he gets too heavy, he'll be a liability in the field."

Not a mention: Eric Chavez, A's.

9 Matt Holliday, LF, Rockies

Others considered: Barry Bonds, Giants; Carlos Lee, Astros.

Scout says: "The guy in Denver is underrated. His production is right there with anyone's, and he's worked hard on his defense."

Not a mention: Manny Ramirez, Red Sox.

10 Joe Nathan, CL, Twins

Others considered: Francisco Rodriguez, Angels; Francisco Cordero, Brewers; Trevor Hoffman, Padres.

Scout says: "You really don't find that many elite closers. Most are just good relievers who pitch in the ninth inning."

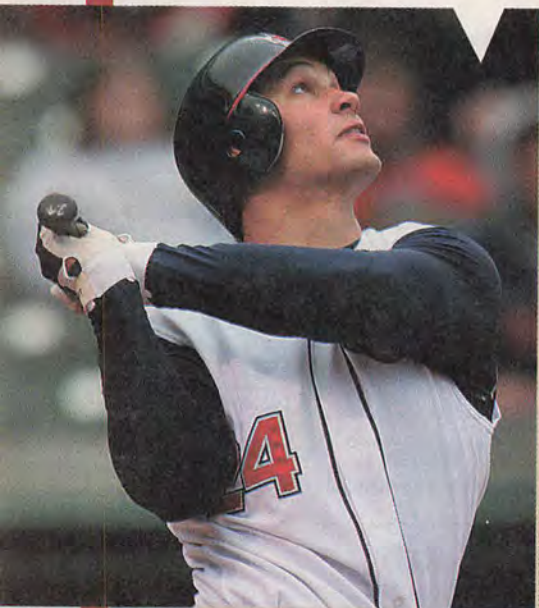
Not a mention: Mariano Rivera, Yankees.

11 Jeff Kent, 2B, Dodgers

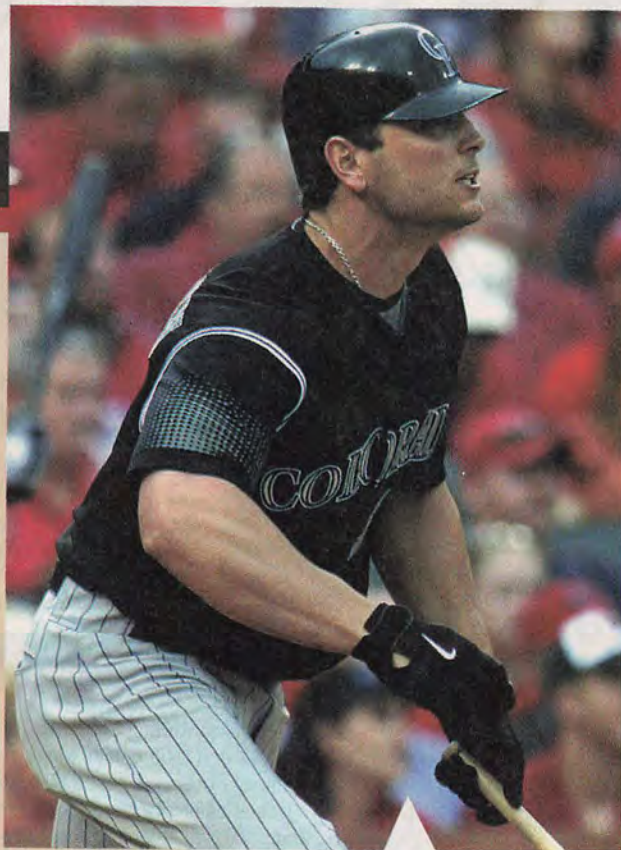
Others considered: Orlando Hudson, Diamondbacks; B.J. Upton, Devil Rays; Robinson Cano, Yankees; Placido Polanco, Tigers.

Scout says: "There's really not very many premium second basemen."

Not a mention: Rickie Weeks, Brewers. —S.M.



JAY DROWNS / SN



TOM GANNAM / AP

The bad news:
You only packed one sleeping bag.



The good news:
You only packed one sleeping bag.

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VIAGRA is prescribed to treat erectile dysfunction. We know that no medicine is for everyone. If you use nitrate drugs, often used for chest pain (known as angina), don't take VIAGRA. Taking these drugs together could cause your blood pressure to drop to an unsafe level.

Talk with your doctor first. Make sure you are healthy enough to have sex. If you have chest pain, nausea, or other discomforts during sex, seek medical help right away.

Although erections lasting for more than four hours may occur rarely with all ED treatments in this drug class, to avoid long-term injuries, it is important to seek immediate medical help.

In rare instances, men taking PDE5 inhibitors (oral erectile dysfunction medicines, including VIAGRA) reported a sudden decrease or loss of vision. It is not possible to determine whether these events are related directly to these medicines or to other factors. If you experience sudden decrease or loss of vision, stop taking PDE5 inhibitors, including VIAGRA, and call a doctor right away.

The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, facial flushing, and upset stomach. Less common are bluish or blurred vision, or being sensitive to light. These may occur for a brief time. Remember to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases.

Please see our patient summary of information for VIAGRA (25 mg, 50 mg, 100 mg) tablets on the following page.

VIAGRA is one of several ED treatments that you and your doctor can consider.

To learn more, visit viagra.com or call 1-888-4VIAGRA (1-888-484-2472)

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IMPORTANT FACTS

VIAGRA® (sildenafil citrate) tablets

(vi-AG-rah)

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION ABOUT VIAGRA

Never take VIAGRA if you take any medicines with nitrates. This includes nitroglycerin. Your blood pressure could drop quickly. It could fall to an unsafe or life-threatening level.

ABOUT ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED)

Erectile dysfunction means a man cannot get or keep an erection. Health problems, injury, or side effects of drugs may cause ED. The cause may not be known.

ABOUT VIAGRA

VIAGRA is used to treat ED in men. When you want to have sex, VIAGRA can help you get and keep an erection when you are sexually excited. You cannot get an erection just by taking the pill. Only your doctor can prescribe VIAGRA.

VIAGRA does not cure ED.

VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) or HIV. You will need to use a condom.

VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac.

WHO IS VIAGRA FOR?

Who should take VIAGRA?

Men who have ED and whose heart is healthy enough for sex.

Who should NOT take VIAGRA?

- If you ever take medicines with nitrates:
 - Medicines that treat chest pain (angina), such as nitroglycerin or isosorbide mononitrate or dinitrate
- If you use some street drugs, such as "poppers" (amyl nitrate or nitrite)
- If you are allergic to anything in the VIAGRA tablet.

BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

Tell your doctor if you have or ever had:

- Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
- Heart problems, such as heart failure, chest pain, or aortic valve narrowing
- Low or high blood pressure
- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- A deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines. Include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

- Medicines called alpha-blockers to treat high blood pressure or prostate problems. Your blood pressure could suddenly get too low. You could get dizzy or faint.
- Medicines called protease inhibitors for HIV. Your doctor may prescribe a 25 mg dose. Your doctor may limit VIAGRA to 25 mg in a 48-hour period.
- Other methods to cause erections. These include pills, injections, implants, or pumps.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

Side effects are mostly mild to moderate. They usually go away after a few hours. Some of these are more likely to happen with higher doses.

The most common side effects are:

- Headache
- Feeling flushed
- Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
- Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

HOW TO TAKE VIAGRA

Do:

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited. VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don't:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
- Do not take more than 25 mg of VIAGRA within 4 hours of taking an alpha-blocker.
- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor tells you. If you think you need more VIAGRA, talk with your doctor.
- Do not start or stop any other medicines before checking with your doctor.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

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- Go to www.viagra.com or call (888) 4-VIAGRA (484-2472).



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VGIF Rev 1, 12/06

nesota lefthander. "Changes speeds well, locates, nasty stuff and he knows how to pitch. Every time he steps out there, he thinks he's going to win."

■ Talentwise, the Mets' Reyes, who will turn 24 on Monday, rates a clear edge over the Yankees' Jeter, who soon will be 33. Our evaluators prefer Reyes' speed, range, arm and power. Two even made him the guy they would want if they were starting a franchise. Another, however, cautioned, "He's had, what, one monster year? Let's see him do it for a while." One A.L. G.M. still takes Jeter. "He plays to win better than anyone," he says.

■ Seattle's Suzuki will command more as a free agent playing center field than right because teams like to reserve the corner spots for power hitters. Though Suzuki "takes some funny routes on the ball" at times, according to one evaluator, he remains a Gold Glove favorite anywhere in the outfield. Two of our evaluators rated him behind only Guerrero among right fielders. "As long as he can lead off and put that speed to work, where he plays doesn't matter to me," one G.M. says.

■ Our findings conclude, that among closers, a change at the top is under way. Mariano Rivera, the Yankees' future Hall of Famer, was

not mentioned as a top two closer by any of the evaluators we consulted. All-time saves leader Trevor Hoffman of the Padres was, but only once. The best finishers now are the Red Sox's Jonathan Papelbon, the Twins' Joe Nathan and the Angels' Francisco Rodriguez, but in what order is pretty much personal preference. Do you want Nathan, who has been dominating for going on four seasons? Or Papelbon, the hardest thrower? Or Rodriguez, the youngest and the majors' saves leader since the start of 2006? Our

The A.L.'s superiority was clear, but the National League was strong at the all-important up-the-middle positions.

evaluators opted for Papelbon, who has the most dominant closer numbers overall in the past two seasons.

■ The A.L.'s superiority comes down to this: better players. The top three pitchers, the top three closers and the No. 1 player to build around all are American Leaguers. Among our first-team selections, however, are five N.L. players, including three at the all-important up-the-middle positions. One of those spots, second base, is dominated by N.L. players. Dodgers veteran Jeff Kent still has enough left in his bat to have warranted the most consideration as second-best at second base. Still, the dif-

ference between consensus pick Chase Utley and No. 2 is as large as any position except the one where Santana works. In center field, the Mets' Carlos Beltran has the best combination of age, offense and defense; his power separates him from the Indians' Grady Sizemore. A slow start by Andruw Jones dropped the Braves' star off everyone's radar except that of one N.L. G.M.

■ Offense, if you haven't noticed, is the name of today's game. One G.M. says that's why Cleveland's Victor Martinez, whose best position may be DH, is his second-best catcher. The days of the field-first shortstop, or even of an all-field, no-hit catcher, are long gone. "Look

at a team like the 1982 Cardinals, who did not have even one 20-home run season. They had only two guys with as many as 10 home runs. A team like that would be annihilated today," the G.M. says. "Today's players are bigger, stronger, more athletic. You see a lot of baseball players today who could excel in other sports. I'm not sure it was like that 25 years ago."

Well, we hope all the hard work by our evaluators has provided at least a dose of useful insight. More important, hopefully it has convinced you that ours is the ultimate Dream Team of 2007. If it hasn't, give us a call this time next year. Perhaps we'll put you to work. **SN**



Players I'd pay to see

By Twins center fielder
Torii Hunter

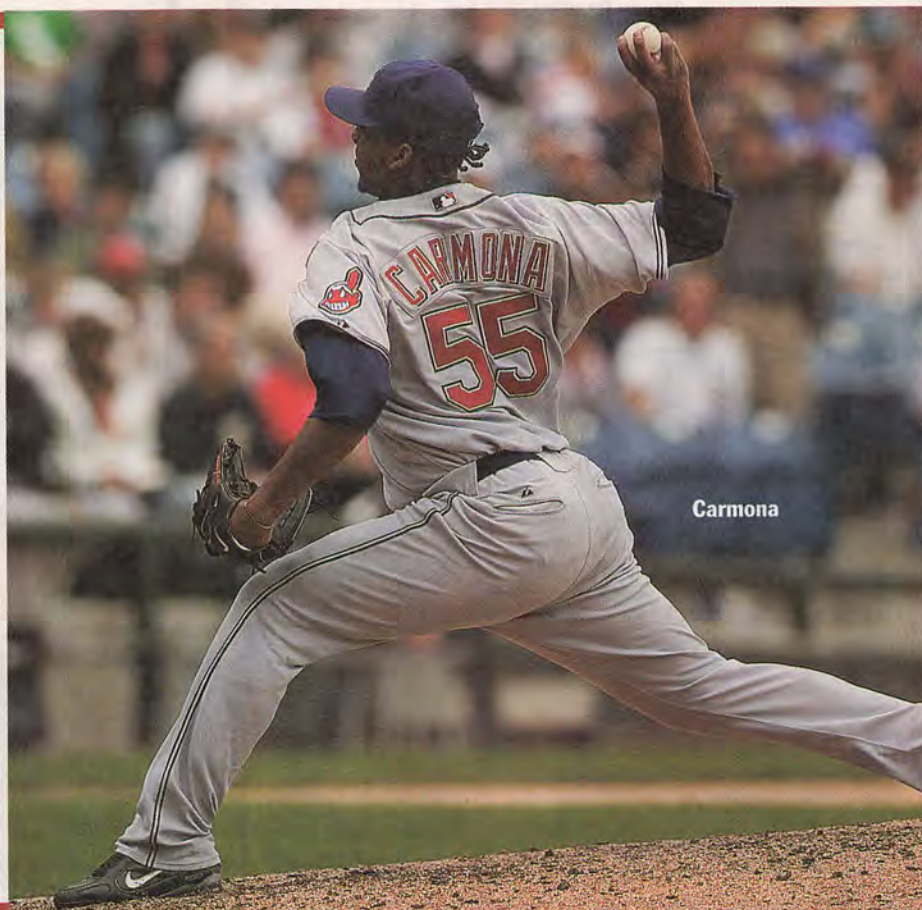
1. Alex Rodriguez, 3B, Yankees. "He comes to play every day. I don't think people appreciate how good he is."

2. Barry Bonds, LF, Giants. "I'm talking about Barry in the old days. When he used to steal, win Gold Gloves, when he did everything."

3. Grady Sizemore, CF, Indians. "He plays hard, is lefthanded. Has a good on-base percentage. He plays a good center."

4. Jose Reyes, SS, Mets. "I like guys who can change the complexion of a game even when they don't get a hit. I haven't seen Reyes much, but I know he can steal a base, go in the hole to make a play, do a lot of things to win."

5. Fausto Carmona, SP, Indians. "I could watch this guy pitch every day. His ball sinks like no other. He throws 93, 94 and can get it to 97. He's right there with Francisco Liriano, talentwise. He's going to be around for a while."



Carmona

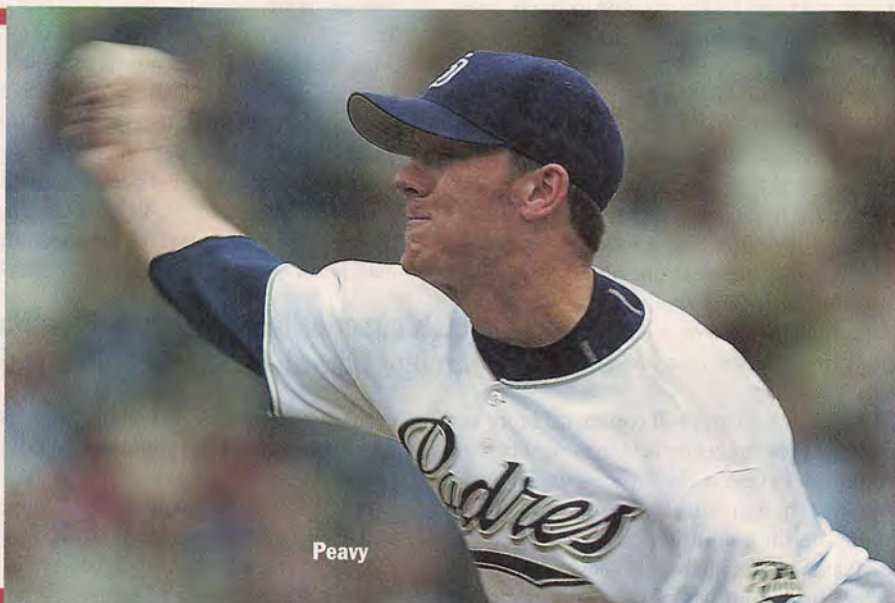
JAY DROWNS / SN



Pitchers I'd pay to see

By Brewers No. 1 starter
Ben Sheets

1. **Jake Peavy, Padres.** "His stuff is just so nasty."
2. **Dontrelle Willis, Marlins.** "He looks like he's having fun out there, and I like that."
3. **Roy Oswalt, Astros.** "Little in stature, but he brings big stuff."
4. **Johan Santana, Twins.** "I like to watch him on TV. If I'm watching him live, it means he's pitching against us."
5. **Felix Hernandez, Mariners.** "Electric."



Peavy

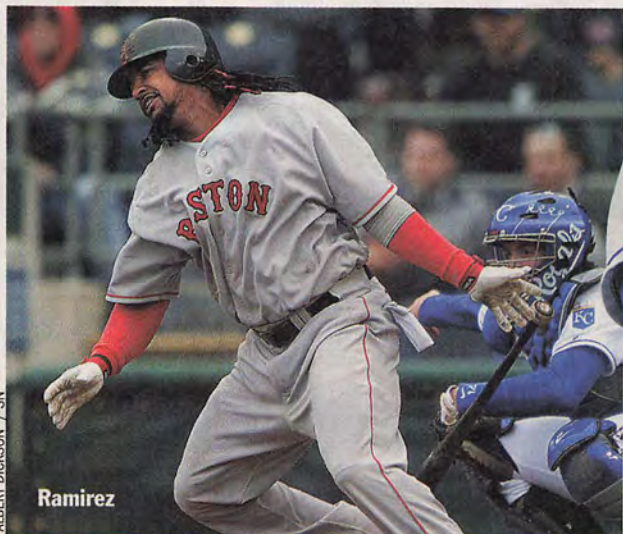
TODD WARSHAW FOR SN



Best righthanded swings

By Cardinals righthanded slugger **Albert Pujols**

1. **Manny Ramirez, Red Sox.** "I know he's not hitting this year, but hey, neither am I."
2. **Vladimir Guerrero, Angels.** "This guy can get a good swing on any pitch. He can hit anything."
3. **Gary Sheffield, Tigers.** "When I watch these guys, I watch as both a fan and as a student of the game. You never know when you might learn something. These guys all have one thing in common: They stay inside and they stay on top of the ball. That's what makes them great hitters."
4. **Derek Jeter, Yankees.**
5. **Miguel Cabrera, Marlins.**



Ramirez

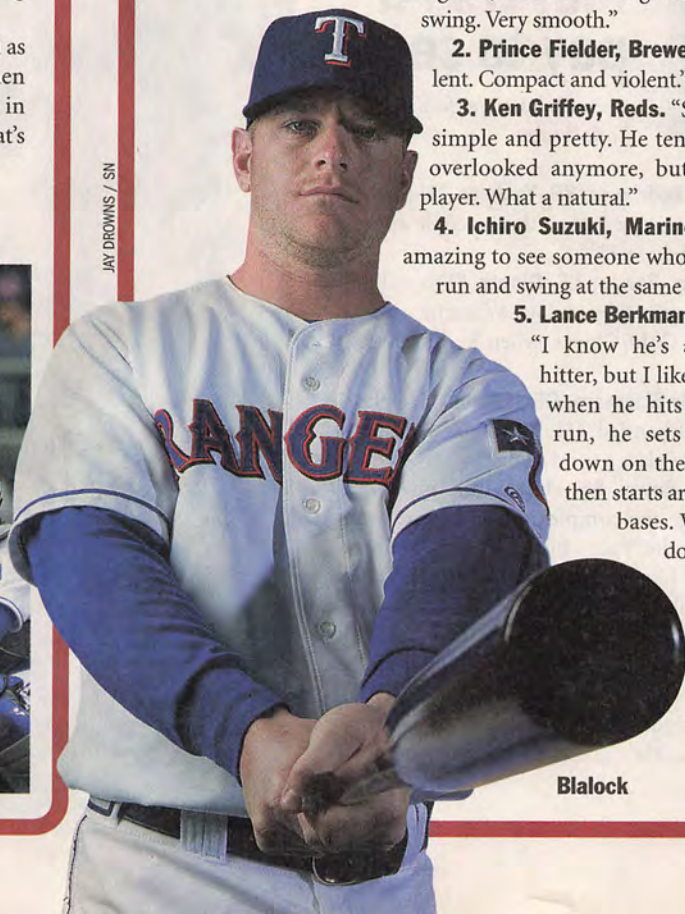
ALBERT DICKSON / SN



Sweetest lefty swings

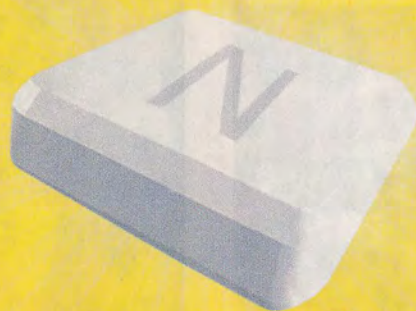
By Rockies first baseman **Todd Helton**, a lefthanded hitter with a career .333 average

1. **Hank Blalock, Rangers.** "I'm a big fan. I like the way he plays the game, and he has a great-looking swing. Very smooth."
2. **Prince Fielder, Brewers.** "Violent. Compact and violent."
3. **Ken Griffey, Reds.** "Sweet. So simple and pretty. He tends to get overlooked anymore, but what a player. What a natural."
4. **Ichiro Suzuki, Mariners.** "It's amazing to see someone who's able to run and swing at the same time."
5. **Lance Berkman, Astros.** "I know he's a switch hitter, but I like the way when he hits a home run, he sets the bat down on the ground, then starts around the bases. Who else does that?"



Blalock

JAY DROWNS / SN



TM

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Toughest to strike out

By Yankees pitcher **Mike Mussina**

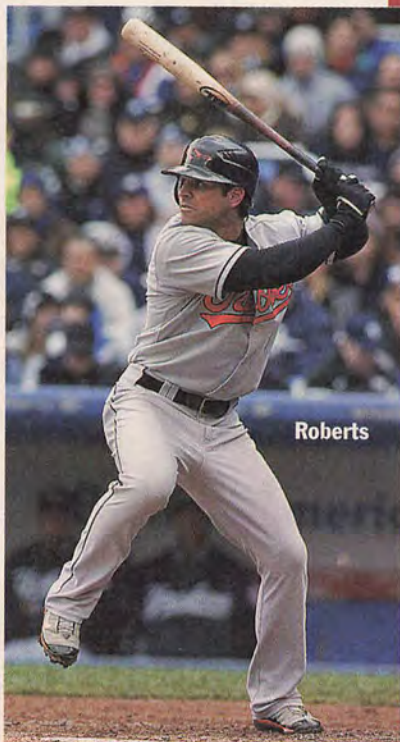
1. Brian Roberts, Orioles. "I only see him from the left side (Roberts is a switch hitter), but he's someone who doesn't mind taking his singles to left."

2. Ichiro Suzuki, Mariners. "He could hit more doubles and homers if he wanted to, but he's more about putting the ball in play and using his speed."

3. Orlando Cabrera, Angels. "Like all these guys who are looking to put the ball in play and run well, his approach is pretty much the same whether the count is 2-0 or 1-2."

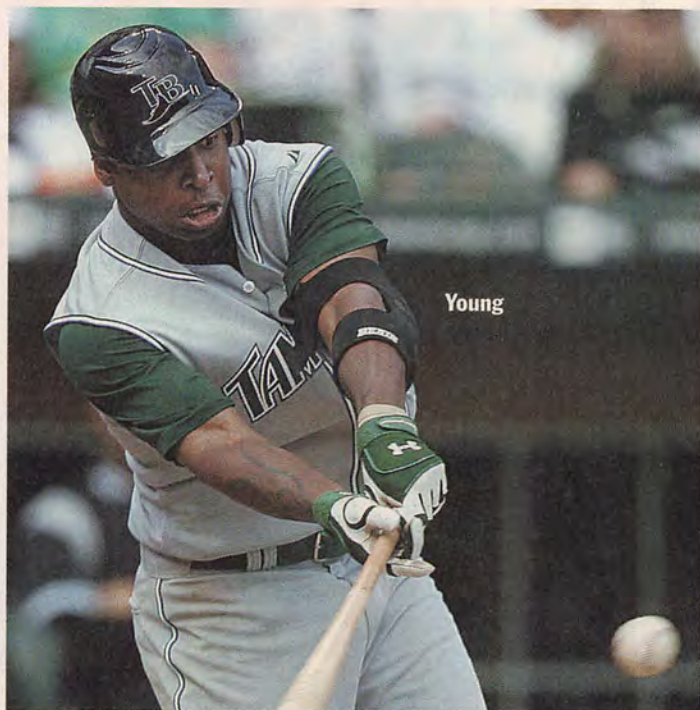
4. Frank Catalanotto, Rangers. "I have to put him on here because it seems like he always gets three hits against me." (Pretty close. Catalanotto is hitting .441 against Mussina.)

5. Michael Young, Rangers. "For a guy who gets 200 hits every season, he doesn't strike out much."



Roberts

JOHN DUNN FOR SN



Young

M. SPENCER GREEN / AP



Best players 22 and under

By Nationals third baseman **Ryan Zimmerman**, 22

1. Delmon Young, Devil Rays.

2. Felix Hernandez, Mariners. "I've only seen him on TV, but batting against him doesn't look like a fun time."

3. B.J. Upton, Devil Rays. "I played with him (in their amateur days in Virginia). His arm is almost too good. He'd get the ball and wait, wait, wait ... then boom. The ball's at first."

4. Troy Tulowitzki, Rockies. "We played together on Team USA. Good fielder. Can hit for power. Faster than you think. A really good athlete."

5. Tim Lincecum, Giants.



Most underappreciated

By Pirates left fielder **Jason Bay**

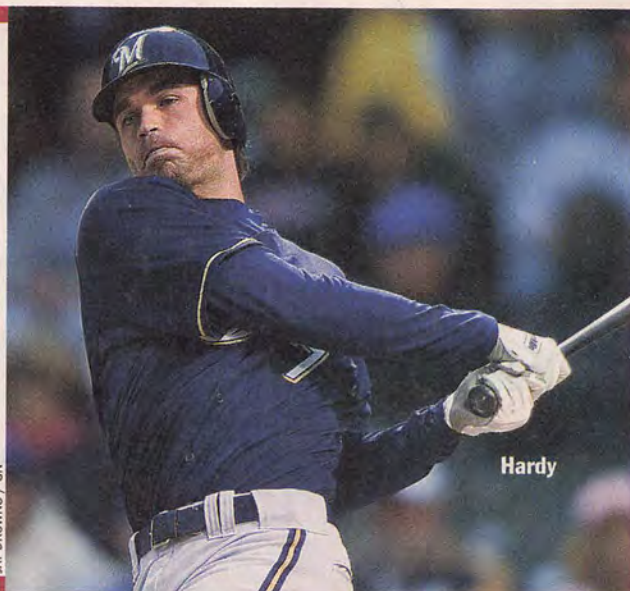
1. J.J. Hardy, Brewers. "He's been looked at as a great fielder and pretty good hitter, but I think his home runs and RBIs have caught people by surprise."

2. Prince Fielder, Brewers.

3. Hanley Ramirez, Marlins. "When we played these guys, he was barreling everything. Fast, and he's also big. Kind of sneaky-big. You don't notice it until you stand beside him. Then it's like, wow."

4. Kelly Johnson, Braves. "On a team full of stars, a lot of their other guys get more pub. But he's got good power numbers and he does a good job of putting the bat on the ball."

5. Oliver Perez, Mets. "Another guy on a team of superstars. He was with us, so I've seen him through the good and the bad. He's always had the stuff. This year, he's been putting it all together."



Hardy

JAY DROWNS / SN



Most dangerous switch hitters

By A's switch hitter **Nick Swisher**

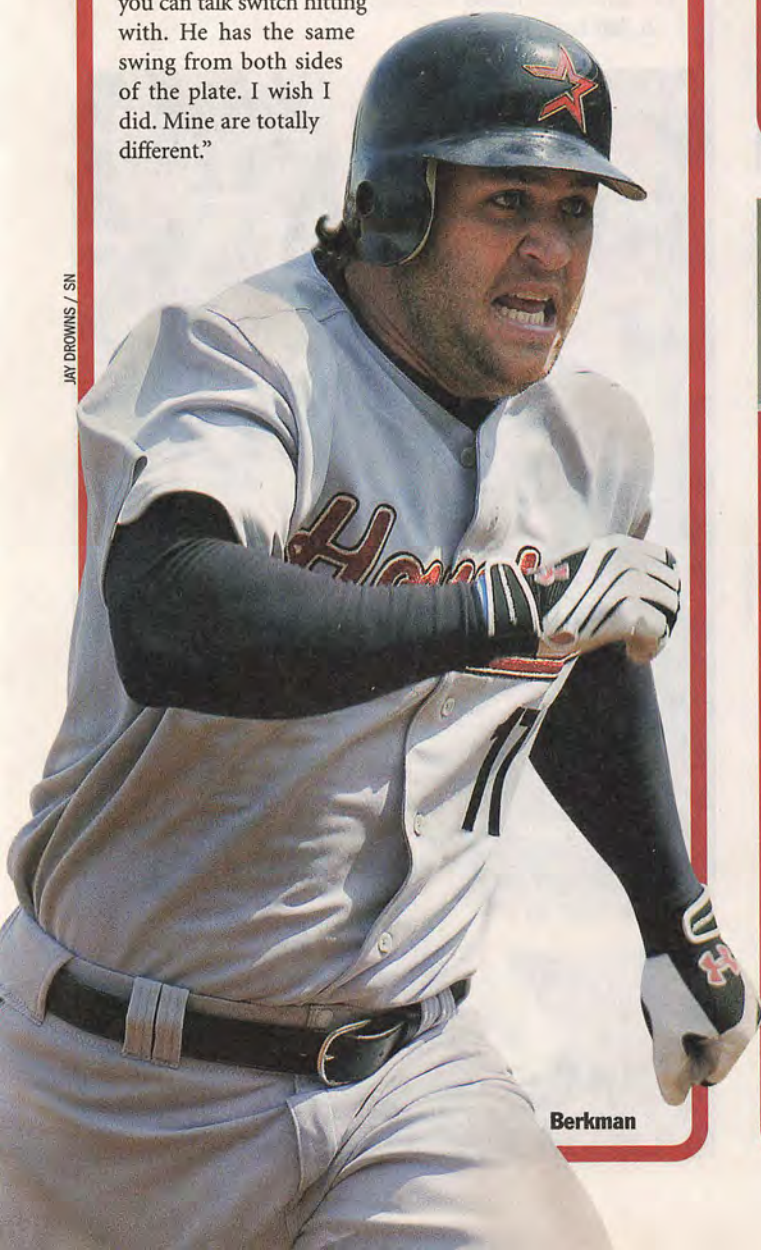
1. Lance Berkman, Astros.

2. Carlos Beltran, Mets.

3. Mark Teixeira, Rangers. "These first three can change a game with one swing from either side. That's what you want from a switch hitter. There's going to be days—a lot of them—when you feel good from one side of the plate and not the other. ... In batting practice, a normal hitter takes four, five rounds all from the same side. Switch hitters go two from the left, two from the right, then finish up with whatever side you're going to hit from in the game. It's not easy."

4. Jose Reyes, Mets.

5. Milton Bradley, A's. "It's great to have a teammate you can talk switch hitting with. He has the same swing from both sides of the plate. I wish I did. Mine are totally different."



Berkman

A scout's delight

By an A.L. big league scout

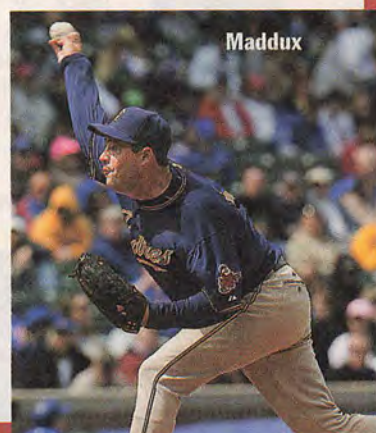
1. Grady Sizemore, Indians. "He does everything really well except throw, and he's gotten a little better at that. He has no fear of the wall."

2. Joe Mauer, Twins. "He has a great arm and great receiving skills for someone so young. He's a tough kid who carries himself well."

3. David Ortiz, Red Sox; Jim Thome, White Sox; Travis Hafner, Indians. "I like to watch the big guys hit because of their power. There's always some danger when they come up."

4. Johan Santana, Twins. "For a pitcher, no one's better. His fastball, about 94 mph, is not that dominant, but he changes speeds and he's got a great feel for pitching. Hitters don't seem to be able to get good swings against him."

5. Greg Maddux, Padres. "A pure craftsman."



Maddux

JAY DROWNS / SN



Canada's finest

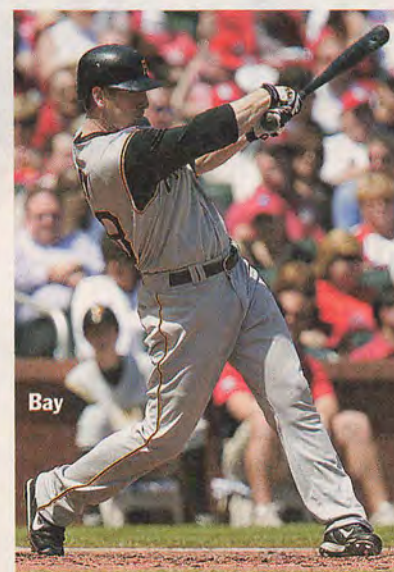
By Twins first baseman **Justin Morneau**, 2006 A.L. MVP and a British Columbia native

1. Jason Bay, Pirates. "Thirty homers, 100 RBIs in back-to-back years. Who would have thought that?"

2. Russell Martin, Dodgers.

3. Jeff Francis, Rockies. "I caught him in high school, and he was throwing 81. That's why he didn't get drafted out of high school. But he worked really hard, went to junior college and got up to 90 or 91."

4. Erik Bedard, Orioles. "We were teammates in the World Baseball Classic. I don't know him that well, but when I know he's pitching, I check to see how he's done."



Bay

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

5. Rich Harden, Athletics. "He was a center fielder in his younger days. What an athlete. He could really run. When he first started pitching, he walked everyone."



Crawford

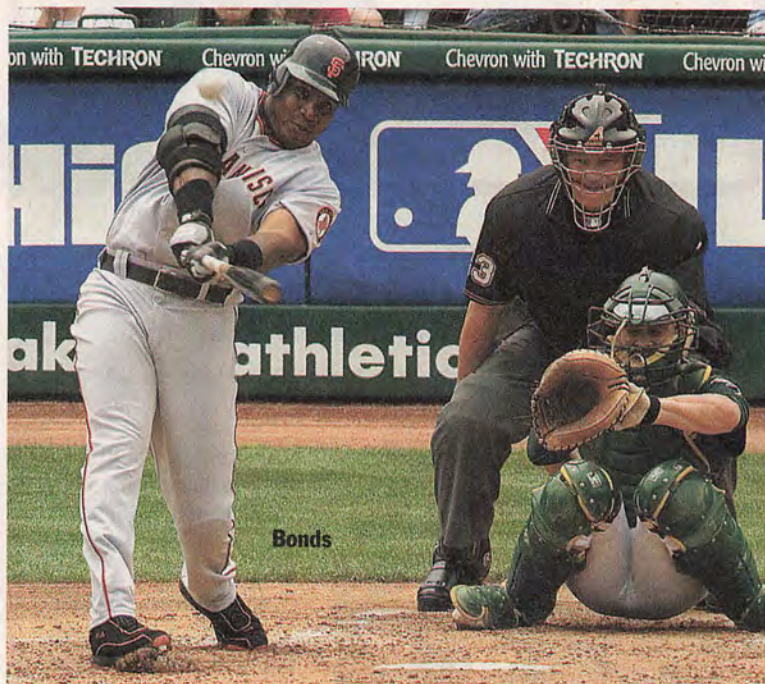


BOB LEVERONE / SN

Toughest to throw out stealing

By White Sox catcher **A.J. Pierzynski**

1. **Carl Crawford, Devil Rays.** "He's the fastest, and he's a good baserunner."
2. **Ichiro Suzuki, Mariners.**
3. **Orlando Cabrera, Angels.** "He's not the fastest, but he always seems to get a good jump."
4. **Derek Jeter, Yankees.**
5. **Corey Patterson, Orioles.**



Bonds

BEN MARGOT / AP



Best players 40 and over

By Indians reliever **Roberto Hernandez, 42**

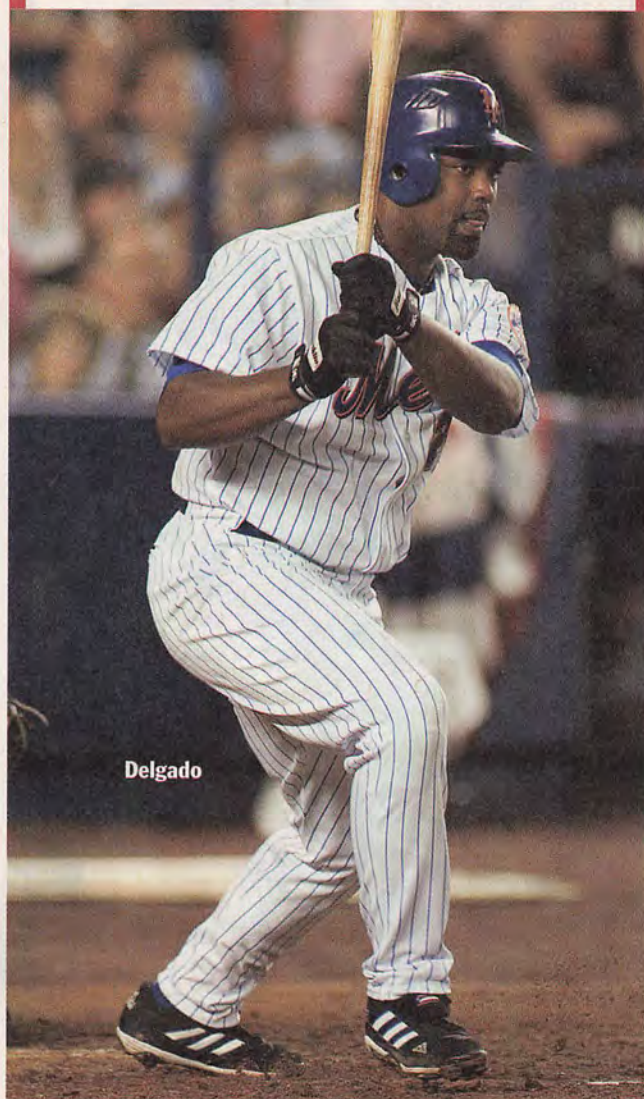
1. **Barry Bonds, Giants.** "Gotta be."
2. **John Smoltz, Braves.** "He may not be throwing as hard as he did when he was closing, but he's throwing as hard as before (in his first go-round in the rotation). His competitive nature is unbelievable."
3. **Omar Vizquel, Giants.** "To be an everyday shortstop at 40 is impressive. He doesn't look like he's lost any speed or agility. If he has lost anything, he made up for it by gaining instincts."
4. **Moises Alou, Mets.** "Still a very dangerous hitter."
5. **Tom Glavine, Mets.**



N.L.'s smartest hitters

By Astros catcher and Dartmouth alum **Brad Ausmus**

1. **Carlos Delgado, Mets.** "He's very in tune with what the pitcher is going to throw."
2. **Barry Bonds, Giants.** "He understands how he might be attacked and how the situation changes that."
3. **Orlando Palmeiro, Astros.** "It's even more difficult for him because, as a guy who usually gets only one at-bat, he hasn't had the benefit of seeing the pitcher for two or three at-bats."
4. **Chase Utley, Phillies.** "Hitters are going to rely on mechanics, and many are the see-ball, hit-ball type. I get the feeling he analyzes a pitcher's strategy even when he has his mechanics going. Of course, I could be wrong about him. He hasn't been around that long."
5. **Jeff Kent, Dodgers.**



Delgado

JOHN DUNN FOR SN



A.L.'s smartest hitters

By Tigers closer **Todd Jones**

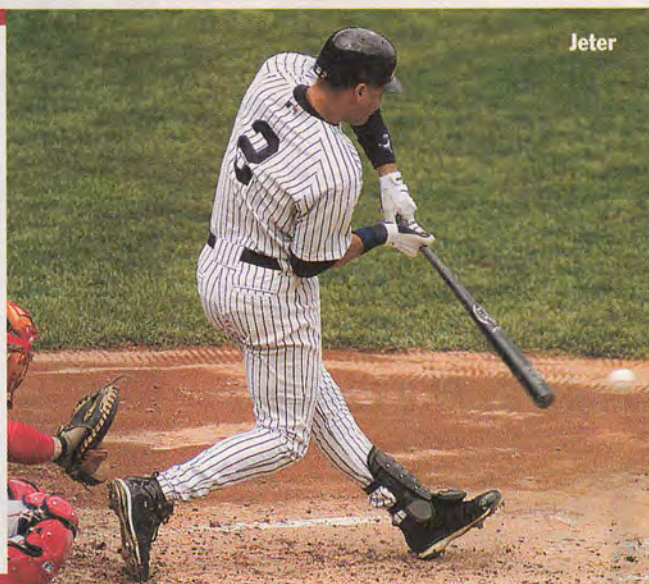
1. Derek Jeter, Yankees. "He is the last guy in the league you want to face with a runner on third and less than two outs."

2. Manny Ramirez, Red Sox. "Manny is known for sitting on a pitch for one at-bat, two at-bats or an entire game. So when the pitch he's waiting on comes, he's ready."

3. Placido Polanco, Tigers. "Only a few guys can adjust to what a pitcher is trying to do during an at-bat. Jeter is one. Polanco is another."

4. Kevin Youkilis, Red Sox. "He is great for their lineup because they need professional hitters who can keep an inning going."

5. Ichiro Suzuki, Mariners. "He has the ability to change his approach depending on the situation. Late in a game, if you need a sacrifice fly, he can hit one. If you need a grounder to the right side, he can do that, too."



Jeter

JOHN DUNN FOR SN

They stepped up to the plate, too

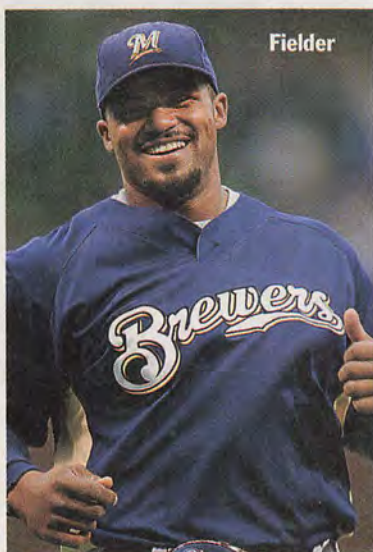
SportingNews.com members also weighed in on baseball's finest players. Their take on questions we posed:

If you were choosing a team for this season, who would be your No. 1 pick?

1. Jose Reyes, Mets 33%
2. Johan Santana, Twins 26%
3. Alex Rodriguez, Yankees 25%
4. Albert Pujols, Cardinals 11%
5. Joe Mauer, Twins 5%

Two outs, bottom of the ninth, man on third, your team is down one. Whom do you want batting?

1. David Ortiz, Red Sox 49%
2. Ichiro Suzuki, Mariners 27%
3. Albert Pujols, Cardinals 14%
4. Justin Morneau, Twins 8%
5. Ryan Howard, Phillies 2%



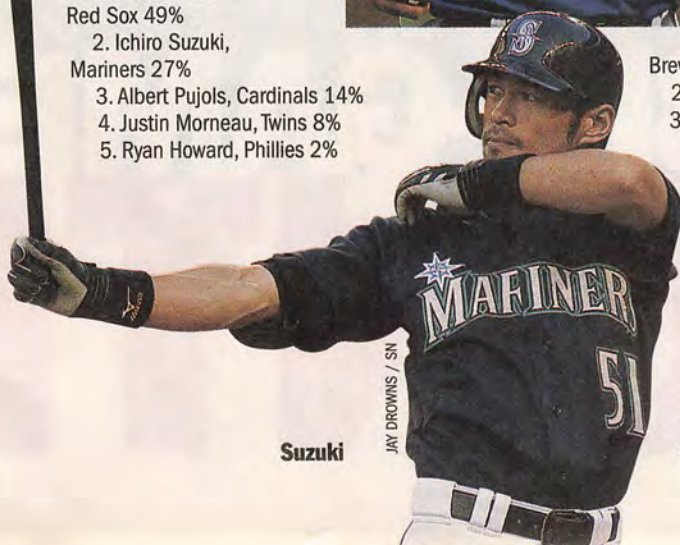
Fielder

What player who was 22 or under on opening day would you want for your team for the next 10 years?

1. Prince Fielder, Brewers 38%
2. Felix Hernandez, Mariners 35%
3. Matt Cain, Giants 12%
4. Joel Zumaya, Tigers 11%
5. Delmon Young, Devil Rays 4%

What opening day 40-and-over player would you want for your team for the rest of this season and next?

1. Roger Clemens, Yankees 30%
2. Greg Maddux, Padres 29%
3. Tom Glavine, Mets 27%
4. Barry Bonds, Giants 7%
5. Omar Vizquel, Giants 7%



Suzuki

JAY DROWNS / SN



Hunter



PAUL BATTAGLIA / AP

Who is most likely to crash into a fence trying to make a catch?

1. Torii Hunter, Twins 43%
2. Aaron Rowand, Phillies 24%
3. Ryan Freel, Reds 17%
4. Grady Sizemore, Indians 11%
5. Gary Matthews, Angels 5%

NFL OFFSEASON REPORT CARD

It has been a wild offseason for the Patriots, who wore out their checkbook while the league's other top teams sat on their hands *By Phil Barber*

The New England Patriots, the franchise that helped restore faith in the draft and inspire caution in free-agent spending while winning three Super Bowls from 2001-04, went shopping this offseason. Like Wilma Flintstone and Betty Rubble used to go shopping.

The Patriots enticed star linebacker Adalius Thomas away from Baltimore with a six-year megacontract, completely rebuilt their wide receiver unit with the acquisition of four newcomers—highlighted by a trade for Randy Moss—and added other potential contributors such as cornerback Tory James and tight end Kyle Brady.

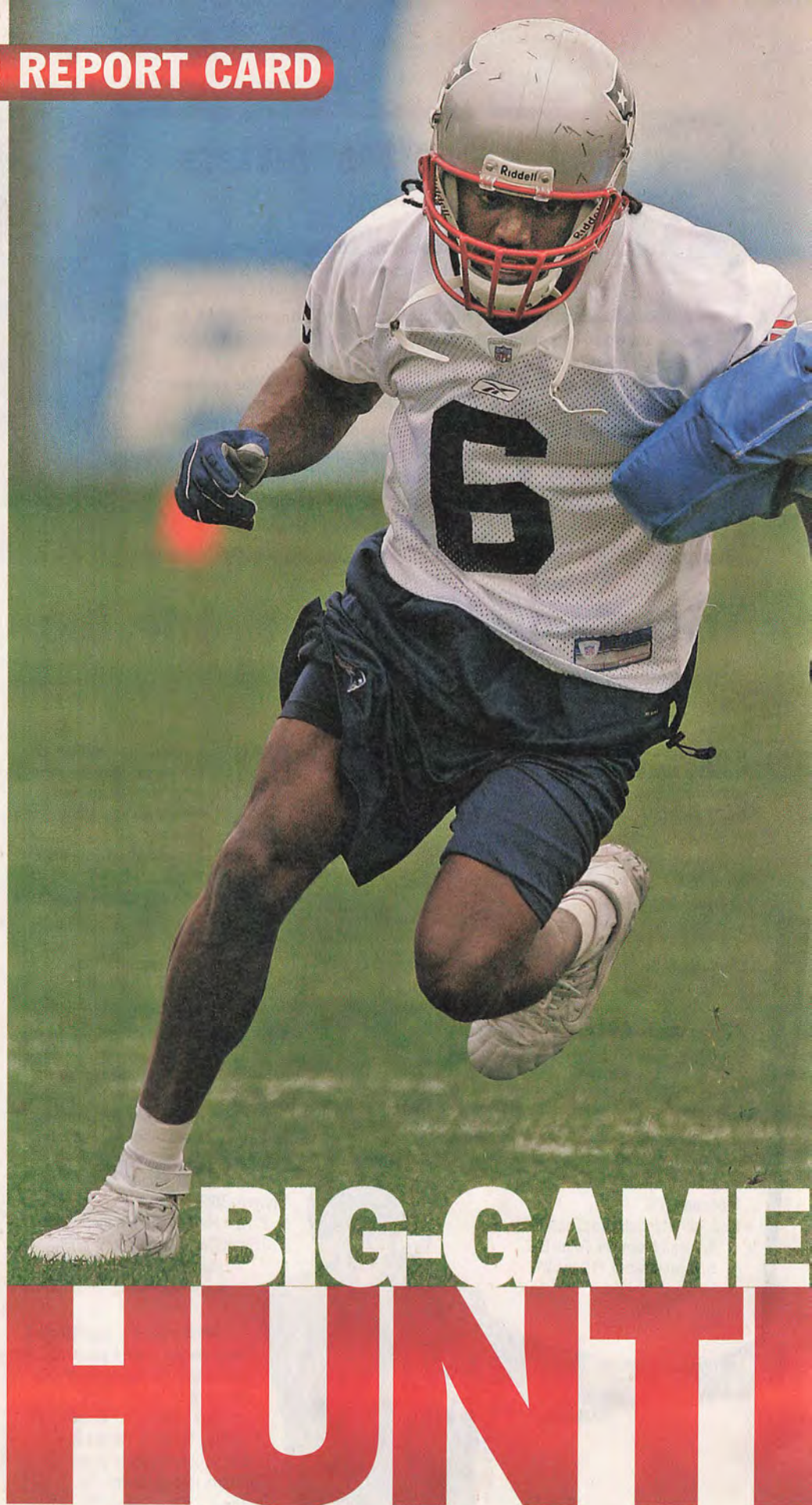
You'd think the Patriots were atoning for the sins of a season gone awry. Truth is, New England was one of only five teams that won 12 or more games in '06, along with Indianapolis, Chicago, San Diego and Baltimore. The Patriots responded by writing checks like they were Post-it notes. The other four heavyweights basically took a nap.

So far, the Colts, Bears, Chargers and Ravens have signed a total of exactly two significant free agents from other teams—guard Rick DeMulling (Detroit to Indianapolis) and defensive tackle Anthony Adams (San Francisco to Chicago)—and have completed only two trades (running back Willis McGahee to Baltimore from Buffalo and safety Adam Archuleta to Chicago from Washington).

The Patriots declined comment for this story, saying they want to downplay their offseason moves. Representatives of the other teams insist their passivity is part of a larger plan, and it all begins with drafting good players who fit the overall scheme.

"The next step, if you feel you've made the right choices, is to identify your own players that you most need to keep," Chargers general manager A.J. Smith says. "Then you don't turn into a college program with guys leaving after three or four years."

"We've always been a team that's been very, very wary of the free-agent market," says Bill





STEPHAN SANOIA / AP (2)

Moss was a headache in Oakland, but good coaching and surrounding talent in New England will pave the way for his return to stardom.

Polian, president of the Super Bowl-champion Colts. "We got burned by the Corey Simon signing (in 2005). We looked it up earlier this year. On balance, we've done a lot better than other teams (in free agency), but we go into that market a lot less. We're a small-market team with not a lot of cash to throw around."

Teams like the Bears and Steelers have adopted similar tactics: They pour their efforts into draft scouting and re-signing good young players before they reach free-agent status. Ironically, it's a model the Patriots have helped to popularize over the last decade. But despite their 12-4 record and upset win over San Diego in the playoffs, the Patriots acted with a hint of desperation this offseason.

The Patriots' aggressiveness took most analysts

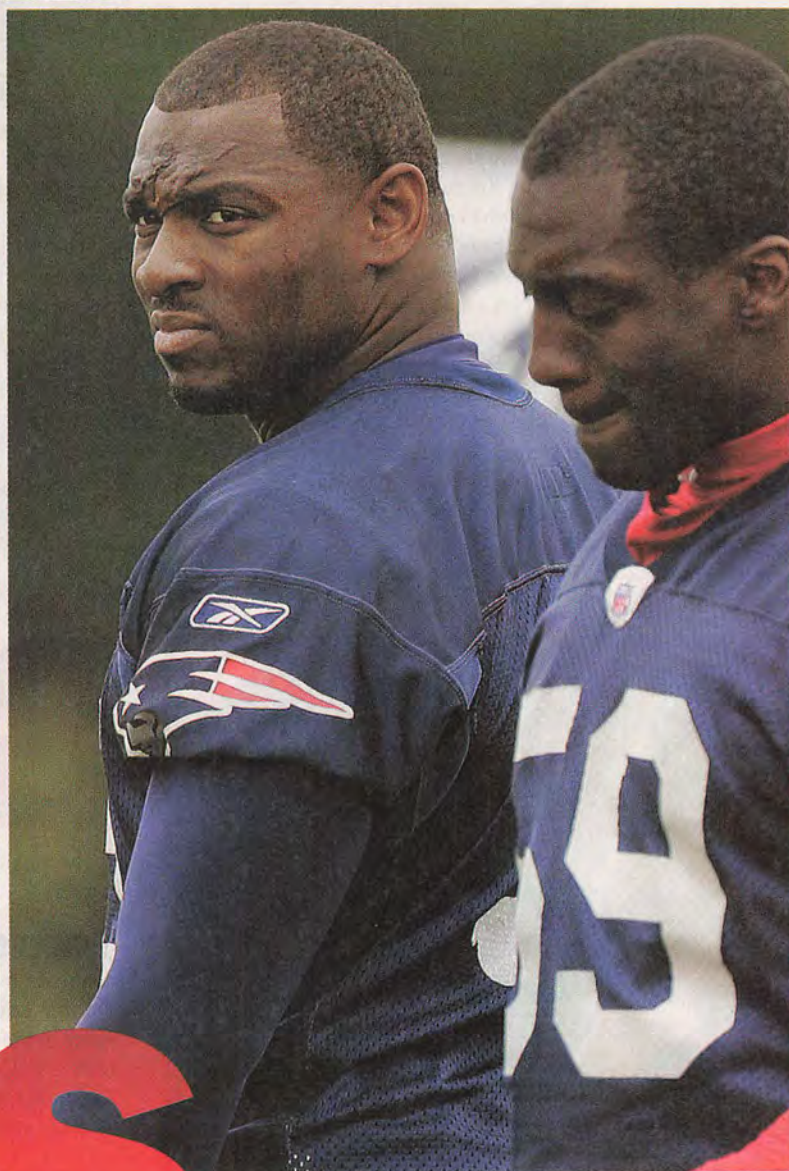
by surprise. And though coach Bill Belichick and personnel chief Scott Pioli drew mostly applause for the maneuvers, many remain curious to see how well the pieces will fit together.

"They've strengthened themselves offensively," one rival AFC East executive says. "Now they can sift through those receivers and see who fits what they're trying to do. Now they can take Ben Watson and put him as a tight end rather than flexing him up. But now I think the pressure is on Tom Brady. Can Brady get it to them? And can the line hold up?"

The likely answer to both questions is yes. Not because of Brady's arm or Donte Stallworth's speed or Moss' leaping ability, necessarily, but because these are the Patriots and we have learned to assume all of their tactics will pan out.

"They've won three championships. I don't think the Chargers have won any," San Diego's Smith says. "When New England does things, I pay attention."

If the Patriots' moves were the most flamboyant, they were only part of the scene. Our annual offseason report card, with grades based on the players acquired and lost—whether through free agency, trades, the draft or the waiver wire—by each team since the end of the 2006 season, tells the rest of the story.



ERS

If any team can use Thomas' versatility as well as the Ravens did, it's the Patriots.

acquisition of two linebackers—Tully Banta-Cain and rookie Patrick Willis—and safety Michael Lewis. Wide receivers Darrell Jackson and Ashley Lelie won't seem like total pains in the rear after the Antonio Bryant Experience.

A PATRIOTS In Belichick's system, Adalious Thomas could be the new Willie McGinest. And this year's third receiver, Wes Welker, might be better than last year's No. 1, Reche Caldwell. Oh, and don't overlook cornerback Tory James.

49ERS It has been a great few months for San Francisco. Rich with cap space, the 49ers landed a whopper free agent in cornerback Nate Clements and further supplemented their 3-4 defense with the

OFFSEASON REPORT CARD

A- **TEXANS** The Texans lost almost nothing, considering quarterback David Carr and running back Domanick Williams (formerly Davis) were pretty much done in Houston. New quarterback Matt Schaub has people excited, running back Ahman Green lends a veteran presence and first-round pick Amobi Okoye could provide immediate impact alongside 2006 No. 1 pick Mario Williams on the defensive line.

B+ **RAIDERS** It's conceivable the team will surround center Jake Grove with new starters at the other 10 positions on offense—possibly including rookie quarterback JaMarcus Russell. Many actually expected Oakland to do more in free agency, though guard Cooper Carlisle and fullback Justin Griffith were astute pickups. Offensive tackle Langston Walker (to Buffalo) won't be missed.

BROWNS The Browns were draft-day tycoons, picking up perhaps three opening-week starters—quarterback Brady Quinn, offensive tackle Joe Thomas and cornerback Eric Wright—but their dealing didn't begin or end there. They added running back Jamal Lewis and let Reuben Droughns walk, signed guard Eric Steinbach and re-signed center Hank Fraley.

BUCCANEERS The Bucs got younger at linebacker (Shelton Quarles out, Cato June in), older on the defensive line (Dewayne White out, Kevin Carter in) and slightly more reliable on the offensive line with the additions of free-agent tackle Luke Petitgout and rookie guard Arron Sears.

RAMS The Rams replaced six starters, all of whom were benched or sent packing. Meanwhile, expect solid contributions from defensive end James Hall, tight end Randy McMichael, linebacker Chris Draft and rookie defensive tackle Adam Carriker.

Carter won't help the Bucs get younger, but he will provide some pass-rush oomph.

Backs on the run

The hip wiggle, the arm pump and the knee action will look the same this year, but the uniform colors may be different. Running backs are on the move in 2007.

Seven of the top 30 rushers in 2006—Travis Henry, Thomas Jones, Jamal Lewis, Ahman Green, Tatum Bell, Willis McGahee and Reuben Droughns, who ran for a gaudy 7,385 rushing yards combined—will be chugging for new teams this season. (Corey Dillon remains unsigned.) And you can forward mail for lesser producers such as Dominic Rhodes and Kevan Barlow, too.

Conventional wisdom says running backs are more interchangeable than players at almost any other position. "It's easier for them to plug in than it is a tackle or a defensive lineman if he's switching schemes," Colts president Bill Polian says. "Not to denigrate their position; they still have to pick up blitzes and run routes. It's not easy, but it's a little easier for a back."

But perhaps not as seamless as you think. "I think it's more complicated because of style," an AFC personnel director says. "Some backs run best between the tackles, some like to run outside. You've got backs who can catch and backs who can't. I don't know about 'plugging in.'"

Three have a better chance to adapt in 2007 than their peers:

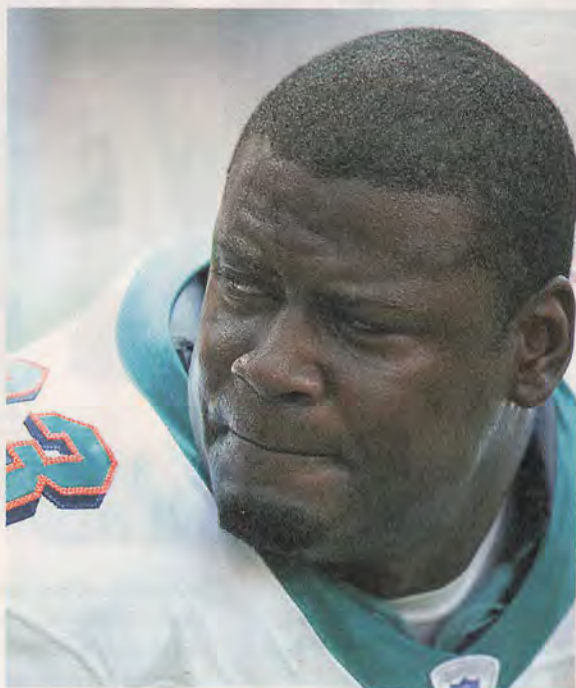
■ **Travis Henry, Broncos.** First of all, after a couple of disappointing years that threatened to make him a career backup, Henry rebounded to have a pretty nice 2006 season (1,211 yards, 4.5-yard average, seven touchdowns) for Tennessee. Second, he's in Denver now. You could stick Condoleezza Rice in that backfield and have reason to expect 1,000 yards.

■ **Willis McGahee, Ravens.** Yes, McGahee fell below the 1,000-yard threshold and seemed to lose his edge in 2006. But the change in scenery from Buffalo to Baltimore will do him good. He's still only 25 and has all the tools to become a Pro Bowl runner.

■ **Thomas Jones, Jets.** The Bears have decided to hand the ball to Cedric Benson, but it was Jones who racked up more than 2,500 rushing yards during the past two seasons and did most of the heavy lifting during Chicago's Super Bowl run. He steps into an offense that needs only a solid runner to make some noise. —P.B.



BOB LEVERONE / SN



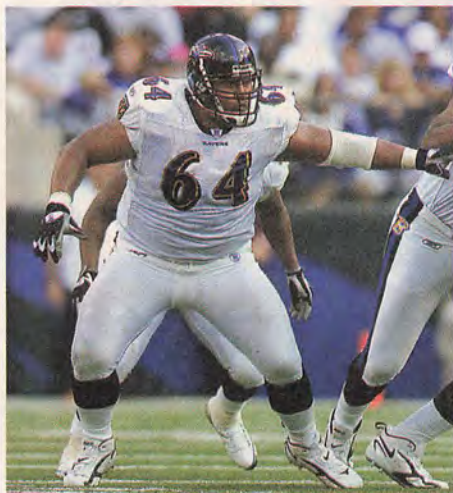
BOB LEVERONE / SN

B **JETS** The Jets were minor players in free agency, though ends Kenyon Coleman and David Bowens should help and running back Thomas Jones was a significant trade acquisition. Coach Eric Mangini believes rookie Darrelle Revis can be a shutdown corner.

CHIEFS Kansas City didn't have that one acquisition that knocks your socks off, but Donnie Edwards and Napoleon Harris bring speed to the linebacker unit and Damion McIntosh is a decent swap for outgoing left tackle Jordan Black. Linebacker Kawika Mitchell's exit to the Giants was the biggest setback.

COWBOYS In a fairly uneventful offseason in Big D, the news was mostly good: the arrivals of Ken Hamlin to team with Roy Williams at safety and of Leonard Davis to plug the gap at right guard.

B **LIONS** The Lions made out well at left guard (Edwin Mulitalo in, Rick DeMulling out) and defensive end (Dewayne White in, James Hall out), but could be in the hole at cornerback (Travis Fisher in, Dre' Bly out). Running back Tatum Bell and rookie wide receiver Calvin Johnson should add spark to Mike Martz's offense.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

The Lions powered up at left guard with the free-agent signing of Mulitalo.

CARDINALS Arizona fans were ready to tar and feather offensive tackle Leonard Davis before he left for Dallas; we'll see if they wind up feeling any better about veteran Mike Gandy or rookie Levi Brown. Safety Terrence Holt and rookie nose tackle Alan Branch are the only notable additions on defense.

PANTHERS The central question is whether drafting Jon Beason, re-signing Na'il Diggs and welcoming back Dan Morgan from injury can make up for losing Chris Draft at linebacker.

JAGUARS The team concentrated largely on signing its restricted free agents (such as wide receiver Ernest Wilford), though Tony Pashos arrived from Baltimore to step in at right tackle and rookie Reggie Nelson is replacing Deon Grant at free safety.

SAINTS The Saints saw a lot of people come and go, but most of them figure (or figured) to be backups. Cornerback Jason David and safety Kevin Kaesviharn will challenge for playing time in the secondary.

CHARGERS After shocking the league by firing Marty Schottenheimer, the Chargers got real quiet. Their most important move was re-signing guard Kris Dielman to a six-year deal.

Some help is still available— or could be soon

June 1 ain't what it used to be. Thanks to a provision in the NFL's current collective bargaining agreement, teams can designate players for June 1 cuts but purge them from payrolls far earlier than that. So no one expected a massive pool of talent to come available last weekend.

Still, 2007 rosters are far from set. Teams are watching the waiver wire closely for the few worthy names who may still shake loose. Several players are currently holding out or otherwise dissatisfied and could wind up traded. Others remain free agents, and they will begin to look a little more appealing as the regular season draws near.

"This time of year, teams look forward and focus on some younger players," one AFC personnel director says. "But once the season starts, you just want to win games. By the second preseason game, these guys will be off the board."

Asante Samuel, CB, Patriots. Samuel wants a long-term deal, and the Patriots are notoriously stubborn when it comes to accommodating individual demands. If New England decides to move him, you can bet teams will line up for the chance to acquire a budding Pro Bowl cornerback.

Erron Kinney, TE. The Titans cut him after he missed the entire 2006 season with a knee injury, but Kinney is expected to be a factor again in 2007. He averaged 40 receptions in the three seasons before the injury and is a solid blocker.

Trey Teague, C. A broken ankle wrecked his 2006 season with the Jets. Even at 32, he will be able to contribute to someone's line.

Sammy Knight, S. Knight was never the fastest safety, and his 31-year-old body has taken a pounding. But his 2006 numbers for Kansas City were typically productive: 87 tackles, two sacks and an interception while starting all 16 games. —P.B.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

A team in need at tight end should give Kinney a look.



JOHN LEYBA / AP

The busy Broncos will have six new starters on offense, including Graham (left) and Henry.

C+ BRONCOS Apparently, Mike Shanahan's patience is as frayed as that of his team's fans. The Broncos project to have six new starters on offense and four on

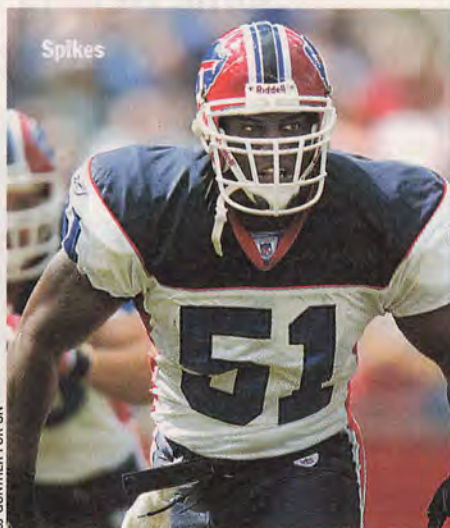
defense, including the likes of running back Travis Henry, tight end Daniel Graham, linebacker Warrick Holdman and cornerback Dre' Bly. But Adam Meadows and Montrae Holland don't provide upgrades over departed offensive linemen George Foster and Cooper Carlisle.

OFFSEASON REPORT CARD

GIANTS Linebacker Kawika Mitchell and running back Reuben Droughns were the team's best-known free-agent additions, but neither has the inside edge for a starting job. Linebackers LaVar Arrington and Carlos Emmons were easy to dump; left tackle Luke Petitgout must have been a harder decision.

STEELERS When you're Super Bowl champs, inactivity seems justified. When you're 8-8, it just seems cheap. At least Pittsburgh's draft was pretty good and the team didn't lose anyone of great consequence.

SEAHAWKS Add it all up—safeties Deon Grant and Brian Russell and end Patrick Kerney signed as free agents, guard Chris Gray resigned, safety Ken Hamlin gone to Dallas, wide



CI GUNTHER FOR SN

receiver Darrell Jackson traded, a fairly weak draft effort—and the Seahawks came out even.

C **EAGLES** Linebacker Takeo Spikes is an upgrade over Omar Gaither. But Ian Scott over Darwin Walker at defensive tackle or Kevin Curtis over Donte' Stallworth at wide receiver? Not so much.

REDSKINS Linebacker Warrick Holdman should be efficiently replaced by London Fletcher-Baker. Guard Derrick Dockery (free agent to Buffalo) might be a tougher assignment. First-round pick LaRon Landry is an impact player at safety.

The best and worst offseason moves—including a double dose of Randy Moss

BEST

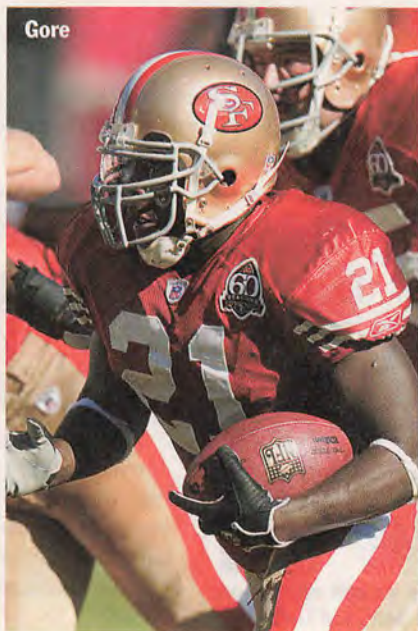
1. Raiders trade Randy Moss. New coach Lane Kiffin was doomed to suffer until owner Al Davis swallowed some pride and unloaded the notorious malcontent for a fourth-round draft pick.

2. Patriots get Randy Moss. Hey, one man's garbage is another's trophy. If any team can get Moss motivated and productive again, it's the highly functional Patriots.

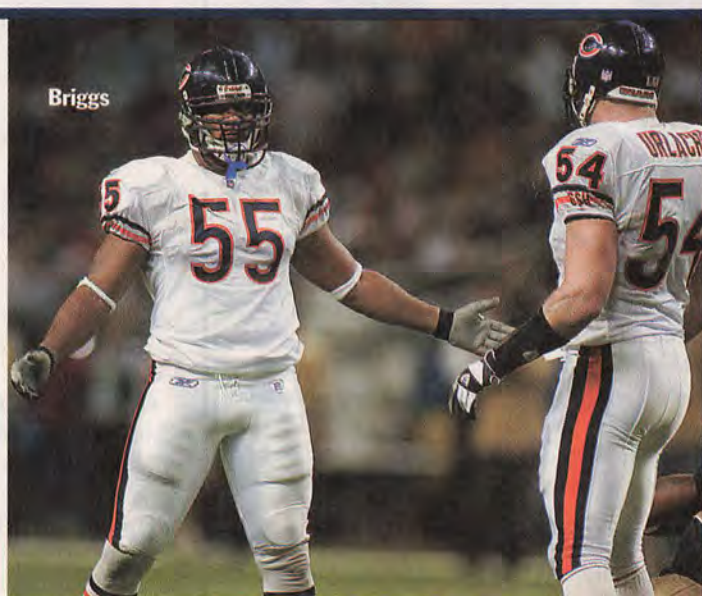
3. 49ers wrap up Frank Gore. The 49ers could have reined in Gore for two more years as a restricted free agent and then a franchise player. Instead, they signed the NFL's best young back for the next five years.

4. Lions draft Calvin Johnson. After selecting three other wide receivers high in recent years, it was politically difficult for embattled Detroit general manager Matt Millen to take another at No. 2. He did it anyway, and the decision could end up saving his job.

5. Browns get Joe Thomas and Brady Quinn. This one has become a bandwagon, but we're happy to jump on it. Cleveland passed on Brady Quinn to take the best offensive lineman in the draft, then got the quarterback anyway at pick No. 22.



JOHN CORDIS FOR SN



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN ARCHIVES

WORST

1. Titans ignore offense. There were times last season when it appeared rookie quarterback Vince Young was doing it on his own. He might have to in 2007. Tennessee lost several key offensive contributors, signed none and drafted a defensive back in the first round.

2. Falcons trade Matt Schaub. Michael Vick probably took too much heat for on-field missteps last year. It's his off-duty work that has the Falcons worried—especially after they sent his capable backup to Houston.

3. Chargers shut down Martyball. You think new coach Norv Turner wouldn't trade resumes with predecessor Marty Schottenheimer—post-season failures included—in a San Diego second?

4. Packers enable Brett Favre. Enough already with Favre's public wavering. He should have retired two years ago, and Green Bay, instead of hanging on his every word, should have handed the ball to Aaron Rodgers by now.

5. Lance Briggs gets snippy. Look, dude: You're the second-best linebacker on a dynamic young defense, playing for just about the coolest coach in the league in one of football's great cities. Sign your offer sheet for \$7.2 million, then go out and make some tackles. —P.B.

C-VIKINGS Seeking a clean break, the Vikings didn't re-sign any of their key unrestricted free agents. The guys they brought in—such as safety Mike Doss and wide receiver Bobby Wade—aren't particularly thrilling. Cornerback Fred Smoot took the party boat out of town.

BEARS Running back Thomas Jones seemed underappreciated in Chicago's Super Bowl run. Now he's gone, as is depth at defensive tackle with the departures of Ian Scott and Alfonso Boone.

PACKERS Was the Pack's 8-8 season really that exciting? These guys more or less ignored free agents, and fan favorite Ahman Green was allowed to leave for Houston.

BILLS There was big turnover on the offensive line, but in the end the unit still isn't very good. Cornerback Nate Clements' farewell casts gloom over everything. This grade would be even lower if not for a very solid draft that produced running back Marshawn Lynch and linebacker Paul Posluszny.

D-BENGALS Cornerback Tory James and safety Kevin Kaesviharn left as free agents; that's a lot of playmaking to replace in the secondary. Eric Steinbach was a reliable guard who bolted for Cleveland.

TITANS Vince Young is a stud, so you'd think the Titans would bring in at least one high-end offensive player to help him—especially after letting running back Travis Henry and wide receiver Drew Bennett get away.

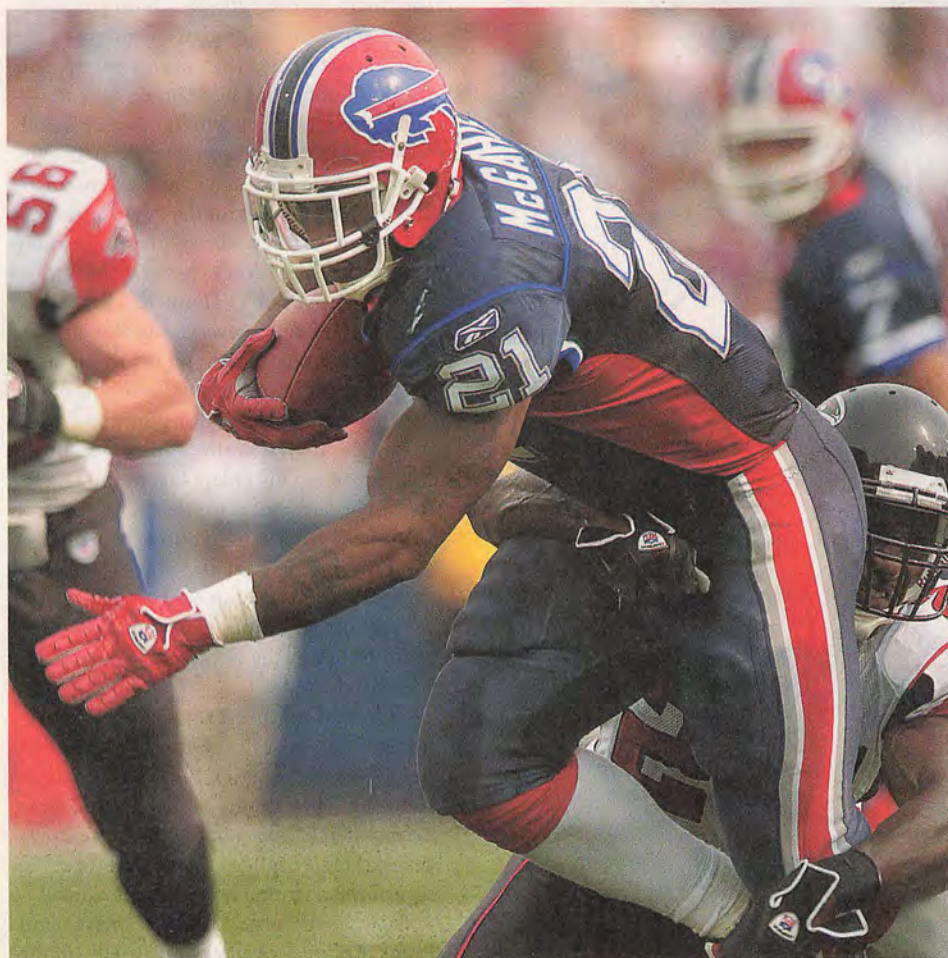
FALCONS Atlanta came out of the draft with three likely new starters: defensive end Jamaal Anderson, guard Justin Blalock and cornerback Chris Houston. Good thing, because they traded quarterback Matt Schaub and got stripped in free agency. The casualties include end Patrick Kerney, fullback Justin Griffith and wide receiver Ashley Lelie.

RAVENS Willis McGahee more than compensates for losing Jamal Lewis at running back, but there are holes to fill at linebacker (Adalius Thomas) and on the offensive line (guard Edwin Mulitalo, tackle Tony Pashos).

Who's new

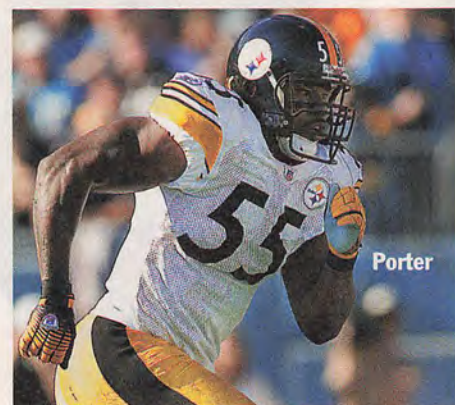
For the most part, the weaker teams will show the greatest volatility in their starting lineups this season. But a team that barely missed the playoffs (Denver) projects the most turnover, and two teams that finished 8-8 (Green Bay, Pittsburgh) are largely standing pat. The number of new starters likely to line up for each team in 2007, including players returning from 2006 injuries:

- 10 Broncos
- 9 Browns, Lions
- 8 Cardinals, Chiefs, Dolphins, Raiders
- 7 49ers, Bills, Falcons, Seahawks
- 6 Bengals, Buccaneers, Patriots, Rams, Texans
- 5 Colts, Panthers
- 4 Bears, Eagles, Giants, Jaguars, Jets, Redskins, Titans, Vikings
- 3 Chargers, Ravens
- 2 Cowboys, Packers, Saints, Steelers



McGahee's Pro Bowl potential stands a better chance of being realized in Baltimore than Buffalo.

D-COLTS This is what happens when you win the Super Bowl. Competitors pick clean your secondary—cornerbacks Jason David and Nick Harper and safety Mike Doss are gone—and your prize newcomer is guard Rick DeMulling, a semi-starter for the Lions.

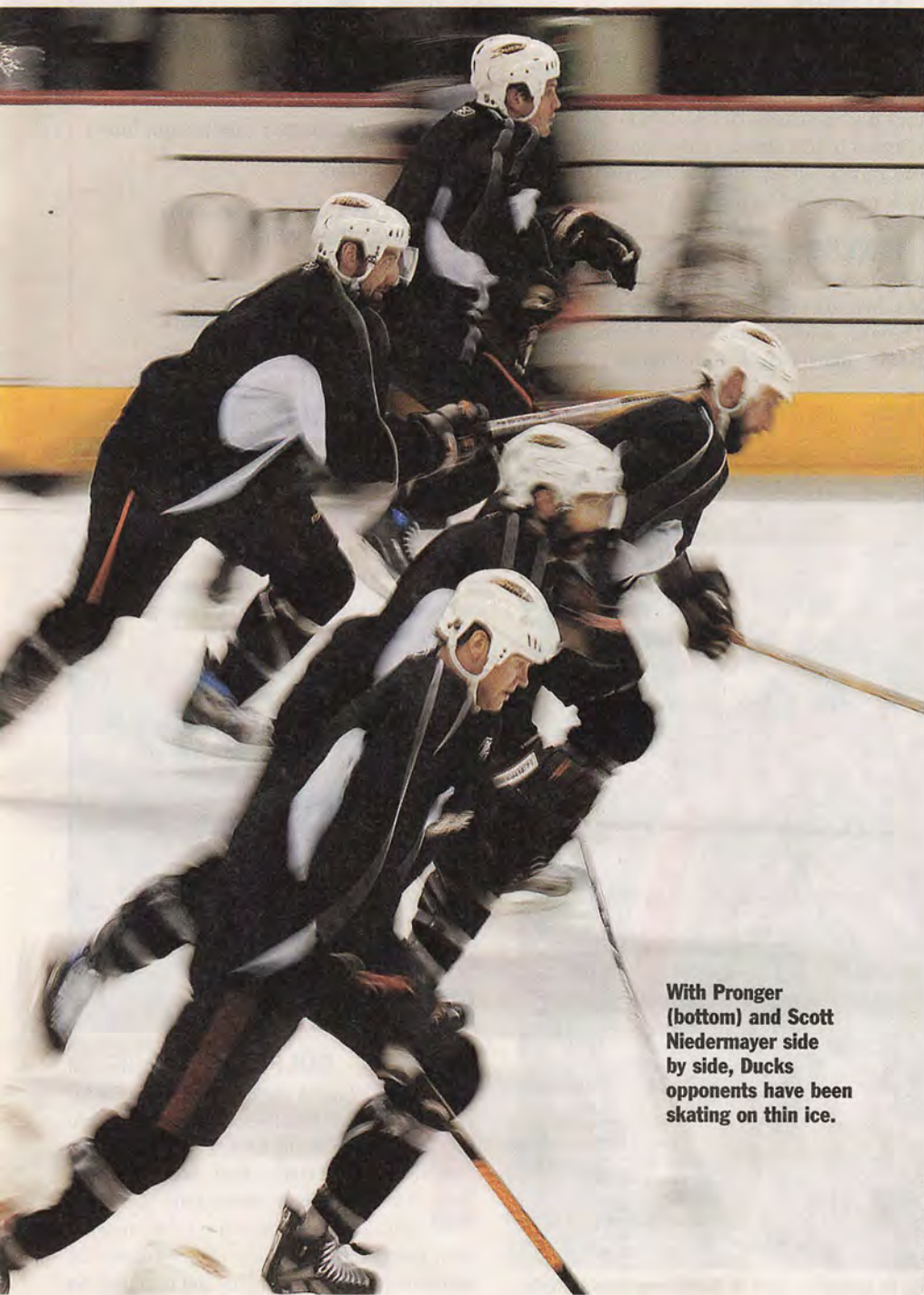


BOB LEVERONE / SN

F-DOLPHINS The signing of famed sack hound Joey Porter made headlines, but Porter is 30 and perpetually hurt. The negative side of the transaction sheet—Damion McIntosh, Jeno James, Seth McKinney and Bennie Anderson on the offensive line, Kevin Carter and David Bowens on the defensive line, etc.—is lengthy and troubling. SN

There's nothing similar about the playing styles of Scott Niedermayer and Chris Pronger—but as a pair, they're making a difference in Anaheim.

An odd couple with a common trait—they win



With Pronger (bottom) and Scott Niedermayer side by side, Ducks opponents have been skating on thin ice.

By Kara Yorio

kyorio@sportingnews.com

Forget Oscar and Felix. The National Hockey League's version of The Odd Couple skates on the Anaheim blue line. Defensemen Scott Niedermayer and Chris Pronger are very different players and have very different personalities, but they have bonded together to lead the Ducks to the Stanley Cup finals.

Niedermayer is the smooth-skating captain who leads the rush and makes the slick pass. He's not a yeller, not a punishing hitter. There's no panic, just preparation, focus and calm in the most chaotic situations. He has been there before. When at his best, every move looks effortless, truly a sight to see.

Pronger provides offense and has a big shot from the point, but his punishing physical presence is what really hurts the opposition. He has a reputation for playing on the edge—and for going over it time and again. Pronger served a one-game suspension in the Western Conference finals against Detroit and was suspended for Game 4 of the finals against Ottawa—both times for illegal elbows to the head of an opponent. He can disrupt games with his style—even to the point of hurting his team on occasion—and capitalize on opportunities with his skill.

Both players have won the Norris Trophy, which honors the league's best defenseman, and both are finalists for the award again this season. And they share one important quality: "They don't get rattled," says defenseman Sean O'Donnell. "Especially Scotty. (He) calms everybody down back there. Chris is more fiery, more in your face."

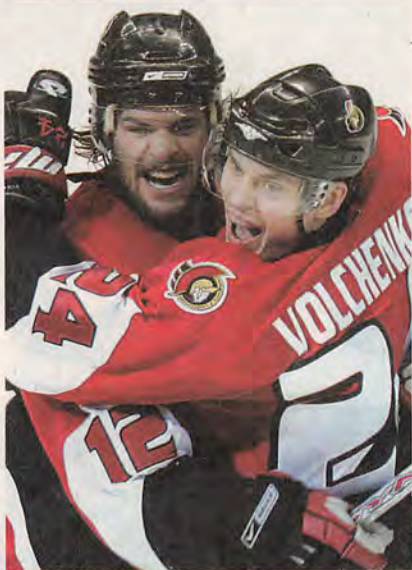
"The most impressive thing is how effective they can be in their different ways."

Pronger played in the Stanley Cup finals last year when his Oilers lost to the Hurricanes. Niedermayer played in four Cup finals with the Devils, winning three times. He is the only member of the Ducks who has experienced that championship feeling. Now the rest of the team wants to get in on the action. Entering the week, Anaheim held a 2-1 lead in the series.

Although neither Pronger nor Niedermayer had played his best through the first few games of the series, they still were contributing. They are the Big Two for a Ducks defense that has been bolstered by the emergence of Francois Beauchemin and is getting contributions from the veteran O'Donnell.

Early in the playoffs, Niedermayer and Pronger played together only briefly on the power play or penalty kill. Against the Sena-

PAUL CHASSON / AP



Fisher (left) keeps his profile low and consistency high.

INSIDE DISH

Ducks coach **Randy Carlyle** has shown a magic touch during the playoffs with goaltending choices, line changes and defensive pairings that have consistently worked out. Carlyle isn't a finalist for the Jack Adams Trophy as the league's best coach (maybe because his team carried such high expecta-

tions into the season), but he has proved himself to be a good leader and decision maker. ➤ Most of the talk surrounding the Senators has focused on their top scoring line. Lost in the shadow of LW **Dany Heatley**, C **Jason Spezza** and RW **Daniel Alfredsson** has been the performance of C **Mike Fisher**, who has played a consistent role throughout the playoffs. ➤ A lot is made of shot blocking during the playoffs, which has thrust Senators D **Anton Volchenkov** into the spotlight. Blocking shots is about more than just being willing to handle pain. Often players slide across the ice in hopes of getting their body in front of the puck—a great physical sacrifice if the puck hits them but a surrender of vital positioning if it doesn't. Some believe the act shows an effort that those who don't leave their feet simply aren't willing to make. But that's not necessarily true. You won't see Ducks D **Scott Niedermayer** block a shot that way. Former Canadiens D **Larry Robinson**, a

Hall of Famer, coached Niedermayer in New Jersey and preached to his players never to leave their feet and pull themselves out of the play. "I was never one to leave my feet anyway," Niedermayer said with a laugh. "But once (Larry) said that, I co-signed on that one."

➤ Penguins C **Sidney Crosby** was in Ottawa for the Art Ross Trophy presentation shortly after being named the youngest captain in NHL history. Lightning C **Vincent Lecavalier**, also in town for the awards presentation, formerly held that record. But Lecavalier lost his "C" just two seasons after it was sewn on. When asked to offer Crosby advice, Lecavalier declined, saying the Penguins' young star should just keep doing what he's doing. Lecavalier now wears an "A" as alternate captain for Tampa Bay. ➤ The league hosted a reunion for the

six surviving members of the Canadiens dynasty that won a record five consecutive Stanley Cups from 1956-60. The night after a dinner in their honor, **Dickie Moore**, **Henri Richard**, **Jean Beliveau**, **Tom Johnson**, **Jean-Guy Talbot** and **Don Marshall** were welcomed on the video screen during Game 3 of the finals in Ottawa and received a standing ovation. Their record was challenged by the late-1970s Canadiens and the Islanders of the early '80s (both teams won four in a row), but that mark will never be in danger again. Dynasties are history in this league of parity.



Crosby got himself a trophy for his mantle and a 'C' for his jersey.

tors, however, coach Randy Carlyle has put them together at even strength to help shut down the Senators' top line of Dany Heatley, Jason Spezza and Daniel Alfredsson, which was scorching-hot entering the series. Through three games, Carlyle's strategy had worked and the Senators' top guns were still trying to regain their early form.

Niedermayer and Pronger are key components of the penalty-killing and power-play units. Seldom does the game clock run without at least one of them on the ice. Even at less than top form, their very presence gives the Ducks their best chance to win.

Niedermayer hasn't played in this series like he did in 2003, when he helped the Devils beat Anaheim in the Cup finals. Niedermayer could easily have won the Conn Smythe Trophy that year over his current teammate, goalie Jean-Sebastien Giguere.

Before beating the Ducks in the 2003 finals, Niedermayer's Devils made quick work of Vincent Lecavalier and the Lightning, winning that

second-round series in five games.

"Any time you play against Niedermayer, it's definitely very hard," says Lecavalier. "I definitely feel for that line, the Spezza line. They're playing against two unbelievable defensemen with Pronger, and it's tough."

That's just what Anaheim general manager Brian Burke envisioned when he traded for Pronger last July. But playing with Pronger is something Niedermayer could not have imagined at this time last year—Niedermayer was stunned by the deal. Pronger had led the Oilers past the Ducks in the 2006 Western Conference finals, and Niedermayer was still thinking about that when Pronger, suddenly, was his teammate.

"It was a strange situation," says Niedermayer, who carpools to home games with his brother Rob, Pronger and Giguere. "But you're excited. It's no secret what he brings to the team."

What this odd couple has brought to the Ducks is another trip to the Stanley Cup finals—and maybe even a championship. **SN**

speedreads

This week's awards presentation provided another reminder that the NHL does trophies better than any other league—and not just the Stanley Cup. It is a worth a trip to the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto just to stop in the trophy room and see all of the shiny silver shrines to the best in the game.

On Memorial Day weekend, signs in Buffalo's airport concourse read: "Thanks for the hope, Sabres." Thanks for the hope? That makes a traveler feel bad for the people of Buffalo—and not because of the Sabres' conference finals loss to Ottawa.

Commissioner Gary Bettman says the NHL is not considering changing its seven-game playoff series format from 2-2-1-1-1 to 2-3-2. But it should. Some say the current setup provides the best competition, but it also creates grueling travel for the teams, particularly at this stage of the playoffs.



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His time is



WOW

You knew **LEBRON JAMES** would get the Cavs to The Finals—you just didn't figure it would be this year or this way
By Sean Deveney



James has Cleveland—a city that hasn't won a professional sports championship since 1964—a little excited.

AMY SANCETTA / AP

LeBron James was in his typical postgame get-up, uniform soaked in sweat, a towel draped over his head, ice packs wrapped around both knees. His teammate, rookie guard Daniel Gibson, was showered and scrubbed clean, in a striped polo shirt and jeans, popping a diamond earring into his left lobe.

James had just played more than 50 minutes in the biggest game of his career, a double-overtime Game 5 road win against the Pistons in last week's Eastern Conference finals. He scored 29 of his team's final 30 points—48 total—and was having difficulty walking. He would need intravenous fluids to ensure that he didn't become dehydrated before the team left for Cleveland that night. Gibson shook his head and said he would do his best to secure a video copy of James' performance, one that he said "defied words."

Then Gibson smiled. "You know, if he can't walk, I'll carry him," Gibson said. "Seriously, he can get on my back."

How prophetic. In Game 6, with James—the NBA's "Savior," "King," "Chosen One," or whatever your preferred sobriquet—struggling with his shot and clearly willing to pick apart Detroit's double-team traps with quick passes, it was Gibson who carried James and the Cavaliers into the franchise's first Finals appearance in its 37-year history. James' transcendent Game 5 was followed by 31 points from Gibson, a second-round pick who is built like a shoelace and is known as "Boobie." (Which really could not be much further from the James catalog of nicknames, could it?)

Heading into The Finals, though, Boobie and the rest of the Cavaliers will fade into the background—this is James' moment. When he hurled the ball toward the heavens (or the Quicken Loans Arena roof, take your pick) as time ran out in the Cavs' clinching Game 6 win, James broke into what might be the first genuinely enthusiastic grin of his four-year NBA career. He has long seemed disappointed with his inability to push his team to championship contention. "That was always the question," says Cavs guard Damon Jones. "Can he do it in the

playoffs? I think he's shown he can."

His talent is obvious—he's a 6-8 bull with trampolines in his shoes and a body by Rodin. His numbers are dazzling—he has career averages of 26.7 points, 6.7 rebounds and 6.4 assists. But James puts tremendous pressure on himself, and from the beginning of the season he insisted the Cavaliers break their huddles with, "One, two, three, championship!" Coach Mike Brown would have preferred a simpler, "One, two, three, defense!"

"I was like, 'Damn, how am I going to tell them to say one, two, three, defense?'" Brown says. "So I let it go on for a little bit, and finally I said, 'He's the man, we'll say it. We want that type of pressure; let's live up to it.'"

The win over the powerhouse Pistons just might mean Cleveland goes to The Finals for the next 10 years.

Just days ago, the ability of James and the Cavs to live up to the pressure was in doubt. In the series opener, he shot 5-for-15, made zero trips to the free throw line and was heaped with scorn for forsaking his own shot in favor of a pass to Donyell Marshall for a 3-pointer. He was, at

that point, a 22-year-old playoff novice figuring out how to win in late spring, the phenom still developing the iron stomach and irrepressible will required of a true NBA playoff great.

After he closed Game 5 shooting 11-for-14 while his teammates were 0-for-10, the stomach was hardened and the will undeniable. His arrival in The Finals secures his spot in the NBA's pantheon of elites and could forever change the league. The win over the powerhouse Pistons just might mean, as TNT analyst and former NBA coach Doug Collins says, "Cleveland goes to The Finals for the next 10 years."

Thus, an icon was born. What's more, James passed the ultimate test of NBA stars—he elevated the play of his oft-maligned supporting cast. "When you watch him do what he was doing (in Game 5), leaving everything out there, showing that kind of determination, it inspires everyone else," Gibson says. "You don't want to let him down."

Safe to say that Boobie, who scored in double figures just nine times this season, was no disappointment. Left wide-open by Pistons double-

teams, Gibson was 5-for-5 on 3-pointers in Game 6. All came either on direct passes from James or on secondary passes out of double-teams, from James to Jones to Gibson.

Of course, things get much more difficult for the Cavs in The Finals, where the Spurs, champions in three of the past eight seasons, rolled through the West with a 12-4 playoff mark. It's difficult to imagine a team as disciplined and tough as the Spurs doing what the Pistons did: allowing James 25 straight points without delivering a hard foul. And it's difficult to figure how the Cavs will slow down the Spurs' Big Three of Tim Duncan, Tony Parker and Manu Ginobili. Almost every advantage—experience, depth and even coaching (the Cavs' Mike Brown was mentored by Spurs coach Gregg Popovich)—rests with San Antonio.

James, for one, has faith. The Cavaliers were not supposed to survive the Pistons but became just the third team in history to rally from an 0-2 deficit to win in the conference finals. James says it was just their time. "We're going to enjoy (this) and get back to work," James says, smiling. "And then, we'll get ready for the big bad wolf of the West."

SN



NATHANIEL S. BUTLER / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

James: not afraid of the big bad Spurs.

The Cavs have a chance—just not much of one

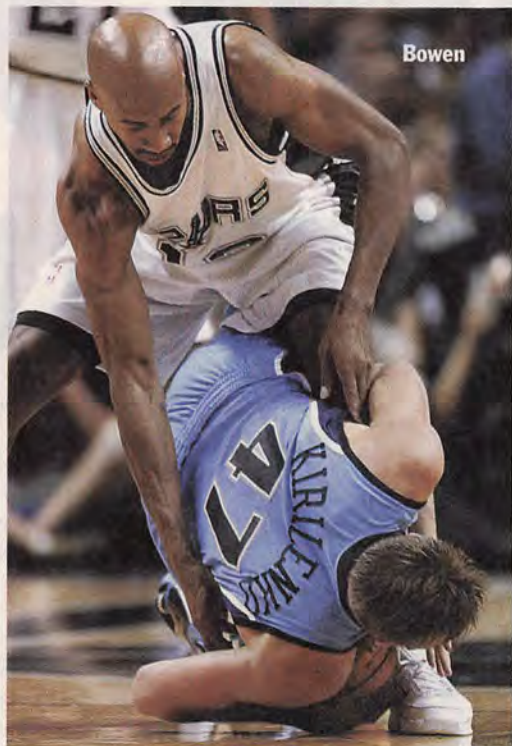
Well, LeBron got this far. But asking him to knock off a dominating Spurs team might be a bit too much.

"I wouldn't give them much of a chance," says a veteran Western Conference scout. Still, the scout acknowledges, San Antonio is not invincible, and the Cavaliers can make this a good series by sticking to a few key principles.

Plan A is Z. The Cavaliers like to start games by getting center Zydrunas Ilgauskas (7-3, 260) the ball inside. That's a good idea against the Spurs, who have undersized centers Fabricio Oberto (6-10, 245) and Francisco Elson (7-0, 235) in the middle. "Z's too big for those guys," the scout says. "Get the ball to him and force the Spurs to move Tim Duncan onto him. You need to wear Duncan down, maybe get him into foul trouble." The Cavs must be careful not to let the spry Oberto dominate on the boards—he averaged 10.2 points and 7.8 rebounds in the Western Conference finals.

Outmuscle Bruce Bowen. Bowen is relentless, a great intimidator and a world-class annoyance for opposing stars. But he is at his best when he can be physical with players who rely on finesse. James is too strong for that. "Bowen is best against someone like a Dirk Nowitzki or a Ray Allen," the scout says. "LeBron is too strong to get pushed around by him."

Boob-ify Tony Parker. Coach Mike Brown had a hard time keeping Daniel "Boobie"



Bowen

MATT SLOCUM / AP

Gibson on the floor against the Pistons' big guards. But Gibson matches up much better against Parker. "Parker has been making shots," the scout says. "But he's had a lot of time off, and Gibson is fast enough to stay with him. If Gibson keeps up his shooting and matches Parker's points, these are going to be closer games than people think." —S.D.

While LeBron laughs, Kobe cries

With his franchise plunged into crisis mode thanks to the unexpected franchise-bashing gum-flapping from star player Kobe Bryant, Lakers owner Jerry Buss did what any good employer would do: He went on a three-week vacation to China. By the time he took off for the Orient late last week, though, Buss (and coach Phil Jackson) had spoken to Bryant and the fervor of Bryant's trade-me demands had waned. Still, when he comes back, Buss must choose a path for handling the latest Kobe situation. His options:

Kowtow. Kiss the ring. Hang his head and say, "Forgive me, Kobe, for I have sinned. We stink, and it's my fault." Then, get down to the transactions Kobe is really after: Firing general manager Mitch Kupchak and shaking up the roster. Make an offer to Kobe's idol, Jerry West. Go for Kevin Garnett (not going to happen). Go for Jermaine O'Neal (talks are under way). Go for Jason Kidd (probably will happen if the Lakers don't get O'Neal). Throw in Ron Artest, who can be had from the Kings for a bag of gym socks. Then ask Kobe, "Will that do?"



ROSS D. FRANKLIN / AP

Hold steady. No player is bigger than the team, right? What if Brian Cook had ripped the franchise the way Bryant did? Tell Bryant where he can put his trade demands. This is the crown jewel of NBA franchises, dadgummit. Bryant embarrassed the team, and such tripe won't be tolerated. Force him to apologize for his demands and swear allegiance to Kupchak. After all, LeBron James took a bunch of nobodies to The Finals without complaining.

Take the hardest of lines. Boot him! Kobe wants to be traded? Good riddance! OK, so the Lakers have no intention of doing this. But maybe Buss will have an epiphany while standing at the Great Wall and decide this headache is not worth it. Start talking with the Bulls about Luol Deng and Tyrus Thomas. Talk Amare Stoudemire with the Suns. Talk No. 1 pick with Portland. Every team in the NBA will listen.

Let Phil handle it. Hey, Jackson is supposed to be the Zen master. Isn't there a book he can give Kobe that will end all of this? —S.D.

It might be up to Jackson to get Bryant headed in the right direction.

Inspired by show-stopping Grady Sizemore, Cleveland has the winning beat—and it just might continue all summer.

The Indians enjoy a rockin' good time

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

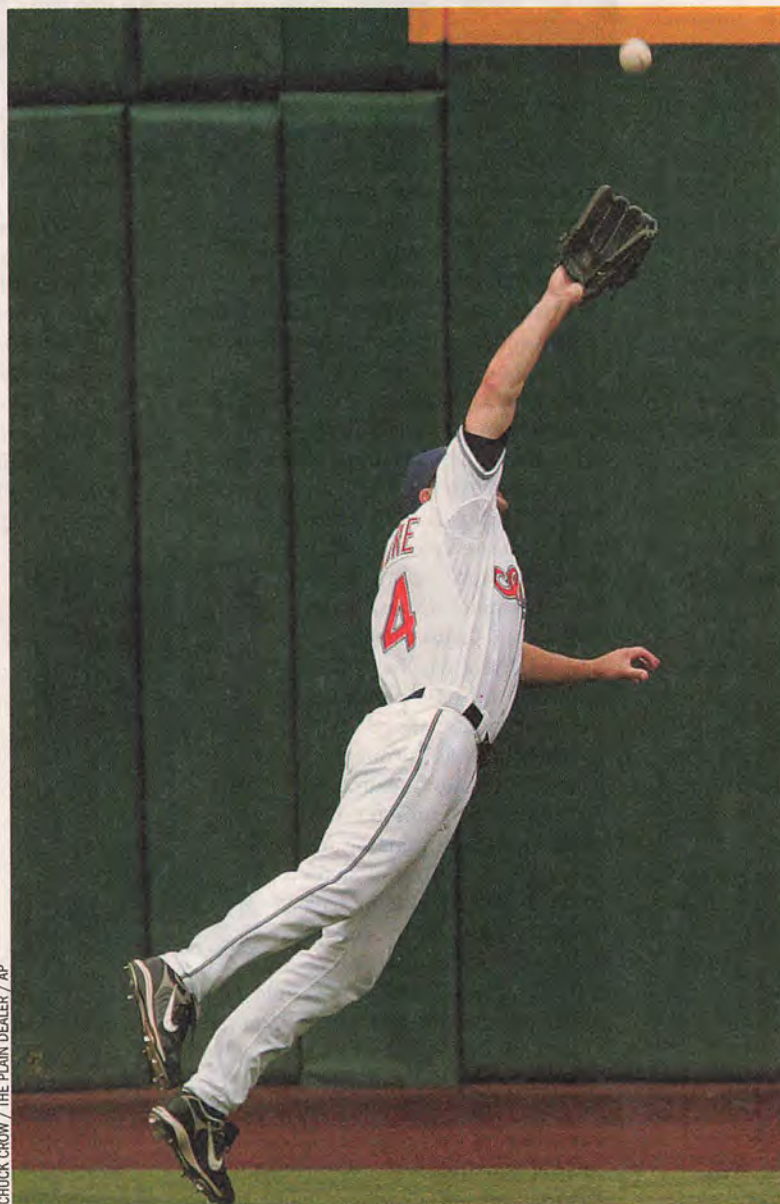
By the time the fireworks ended and the happy crowd poured onto Rock 'n' Roll Boulevard, the signs were clear: Special times had arrived in Cleveland, and I'm not talking about the city's NBA team.

The Indians had just rallied with five ninth-inning runs to overcome a 4-run deficit for the second time in the game and defeated the defending American League champion Tigers. The wild victory gave the Indians five consecutive victories over their Central Division rivals and a franchise-best 19-4 start at home—and it had the feel of a game that will be looked back upon as season-defining.

"I hope so," Indians ace C.C. Sabathia says. "All I know is, this sure is fun. ... But we'll see."

Sabathia, who boasts an 8-1 record, and the Indians have been around enough to know a 4½-game lead on June 1 means little come October. They know the Tigers they faced the past two weekends were "dinged up pretty good," to borrow Tigers manager Jim Leyland's description. And the Indians know they're unlikely to beat up all of their A.L. Central opponents all season. (They were 15-4 against them after their stunning win.)

But I know this: After they beat a chief competitor five out of seven times in a 10-day period—the Tigers rebounded to win last Saturday and Sunday—it's not too early to draw certain conclusions:



With plays like this one against Detroit, Sizemore is grabbing attention from opponents, scouts and Jacobs Field fans.

Grady Sizemore is the real deal. Watch him for just a couple of games and you understand why scouts are as infatuated as female fans—at Jacobs Field, screams of "I love you, Grady!" are heard as regularly as the P.A. announcer's "Now

batting ..." introductions.

The Indians called off team batting practice before the series opener last week, but Sizemore didn't. As teammates chilled in the clubhouse, he was hitting soft-toss. When rain forced batting practice indoors the next day, Sizemore went out and practiced takeoffs.

All he did in the opener was rob Curtis Granderson of extra bases with a diving catch on the track, triple off the center field fence, score two runs, drive in two runs, walk and get

hit by a pitch for the ninth time. (He shares the league lead.) And, as is his nature, he shrugged it off like another day at the office.

"I think I will go home and watch that one, though," he said with a smile of his highlight catch.

Fausto Carmona is going to be a star. What a lyrical name. Get used to it. We're going hear it a lot. You might remember Carmona, 23, as the rookie who blew three saves in a week last season and finished 1-10.

Well, the lanky righthander has rebounded in a big way by not trying to throw his 95-mph sinkerball past hitters. Instead, in a starting role, he is inducing grounders (and, probably, broken bats) at a league-leading rate. Carmona reeled off victories in five consecutive starts in one stretch, going at least seven innings in each outing and never allowing more than three runs. He beat the Tigers to complete the Indians' three-game sweep in Detroit before

speedreads

Want to feel better about your lousy week? Easy. Think about A-Rod's.

Earlier this season, Aaron Harang was telling me about Carlos Zambrano's strength, saying he's as strong as

anyone in the league. Now I know what he was talking about. So does Michael Barrett.

Incredible numbers of the season: Indians starter Paul Byrd has twice as many victories (six) as walks allowed (three).

being touched for five runs in six innings in a rematch in Cleveland. A scout at the second game was nonetheless impressed.

"I don't think anyone throws their sinker harder than he does—not (Arizona's Brandon) Webb, not (Colorado's Aaron) Cook," he says. "He has a chance to be one of the better starters in the league."

The infield spots are settled. Surprise, top prospect Andy Marte is nowhere to be found. Handed the third base job in spring training, he lost it by the last week of April. With Marte first on the disabled list and now in the minors, Casey Blake has gone from super utilityman to third base fixture and Ryan Garko has gone from part-time to full-time first baseman. They are thriving in their roles as regulars.

The Indians can go long. One reason the team dominated the Tigers early was 15 homers in their first six meetings. Victor Martinez equaled the Tigers' entire output with five, none bigger than a 3-run homer in the ninth inning of the 12-11 comeback victory that moved Cleveland within one run. "He's the heart of our team," Garko says.

Martinez, Jhonny Peralta, Travis Hafner and Sizemore began the week on pace for 30 homers. The Tigers, meanwhile, were waiting for their new bat, Gary Sheffield, to deliver against the Indians. He was held to two RBIs through the first six meetings and became so frustrated in the series opener at Cleveland that he was tossed for a confrontation with umpire Greg Gibson. Sheffield blamed his outburst on two called strikes that continued what he sees as a seasonlong pattern of not getting respect. Even before he was suspended by the league the next day (Sheffield appealed), Detroit's DH was threatening to take matters into his own hands. "Read into that however you want," Sheffield said. "But it won't be pretty, trust me."

Sheffield needs to stay out of trouble. With the Indians on their way to a special summer, things will be challenging enough for the Tigers. **SN**

BLOG ALERT

'I have not talked to anyone who likes Tropicana Field. I know it's not baseball the way it was meant to be, but so what? Different can be good.'

Stan McNeal picks his favorite ballparks and isn't embarrassed (apparently) to admit he likes the Devil Rays' cave. Share your faves at sportingnews.com.



INSIDE DISH

If this continues, the Tidewater region of Virginia will be known for cranking out third basemen like San Pedro

de Macoris of the Dominican Republic once was known for producing shortstops. The latest to arrive is the Diamondbacks' **Mark Reynolds**, who has followed the Mets' **David Wright** and the Nationals' **Ryan Zimmerman**. (In addition, two others from the area, Devil Rays 2B **B.J. Upton** and Twins RF **Michael Cuddyer**, used to play third.) Called up in mid-May after **Chad Tracy** injured his rib cage, Reynolds hit .387 with four homers and 15 RBIs in his first 17 games. His arrival seemed to spark a couple of the Diamondbacks' more bally-hooed young hitters, **Conor Jackson** and **Carlos Quentin**. The D-backs have led the N.L. in runs and on-base percentage since Reynolds' arrival. With Tracy, who was hitting .311 when he went on the disabled list, likely to return for next week's interleague games against the Yankees and Orioles, the D-backs will be able to have both Reynolds and Tracy in the lineup for at least six games

because of the DH. Reynolds could end up sharing time at first base with Jackson and at third with Tracy. ➤ RHP **James Shields** is emerging as the Devil Rays' ace in part because of his ability to adjust. He tried pounding fastballs past the Tigers last week and allowed three first-inning runs. Once he calmed down—a talk with pitching coach **Jim Hickey** helped—Shields began relying more on changeups and curves. He did not allow another run and finished with his first complete-game victory. ➤ Need more evidence of the A.L.'s superiority beyond its 24-18 edge over the N.L. heading into the second round



Third basemen continue to roll in from the Tidewater region—the D-backs' Reynolds is the latest.

of interleague play? Look no further than the early success RHP **Todd Wellemeyer** is having for the Cardinals. Wellemeyer was dumped by the Royals because of wildness, but the reliever won his first start after he was inserted into the Cardinals' made-over rotation. He averaged 21.3 pitches per inning with the Royals but only 14.6 in his first four outings against less-disciplined N.L. hitters.

➤ After Tigers DH **Gary Sheffield** was ejected for throwing the remainder of his broken bat in a dispute with home plate umpire **Greg Gibson**, he started pointing his finger and trying to get in Gibson's face. Tigers manager **Jim Leyland**, out to argue on Sheffield's behalf, ended up having to hold back a guy 24 years younger and a whole lot bigger. Help could not arrive soon enough. "I had to hold him a little tight, and I think he was about to throw me around like a doll," Leyland says. "I don't know where (first base coach **Andy**) **Van Slyke** was. He lifts weights six days a week."

➤ SS **Tony Pena** has been a rare bright spot for the Royals. Pena, 26, had passed the prospect stage and did not figure in the Braves' future when he was traded in March. Immediately made the Royals' starter, he has shown a strong arm and an improving bat. He hit .330 in May and carried an 11-game hitting streak into the week. "With his arm, he should have been a pitcher. He could not hit a lick," Royals G.M. **Dayton Moore** says. "But he has great makeup and has made himself a big league hitter." Still, the Royals want Pena to shorten his swing and learn to take a walk.

H. RUMPH JR. / AP

Fantasy Source

When the injury bug bites, painful decisions are sure to follow.

Think before you scratch

By Chris Bahr

cbahr@sportingnews.com

After being remarkably free of injuries during the first two months of the season, a couple of my fantasy teams are feeling the pain. Those little red injury crosses on my computer screen are starting to look a lot like an acne outbreak. They weren't there when I went to bed, but suddenly they're all over the place.

Whether the injury bug bit your team early, gave you time to develop a false sense of invincibility or has yet to appear, there will come a time when you'll have to make some tough decisions.

On the plus side, injured players make your lineup decisions easier in daily leagues because your bench spots are occupied by valuable players. But how many injured players can you afford to carry? Even in leagues that allow for some disabled list spots, a rash of injuries severely limits flexibility.

How long can you wait to make a move?

There's no simple answer, so ask yourself a few questions:

1. Will rival owners claim the injured players I purge? The other owners in your league are aware of your situation and are circling like vultures, just waiting for you to screw up and cut a valuable player such as Scott

Cut Roberts and you'll run the risk of helping a competitor.

Podsednik or Dave Roberts. This could become a double whammy—you weaken your squad and strengthen another in the process.

2. Where do I sit in the standings? If you have a big lead and can afford a couple of down



Zumaya

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

weeks, bite the bullet and wait out the aches and pains. But if you're slipping hopelessly out of contention, patience is less of an option. Face it, a guy like Reed Johnson isn't worth the wait.

3. How long will my injured players be out? Short-term injuries are not much of a concern. But if you're looking at a four- to six-week (or more) timetable and need more roster flexibility, it makes sense to create room by cutting an injured player. In other words, go ahead and set Joel Zumaya free.

4. What player will I pick up as a replacement? If nothing of value is available, it makes no sense to let a good hitter or pitcher go. In fact, you might be better off getting no production from an injured player than a few 0-for-4 performances from a waiver pickup.



FANTASY DISH

Where have you gone, **Minute Maid Park**? The former hitters paradise has played like a pitchers park this season and is continuing its slide in Fantasy Source's ballpark rankings. From 2004-06, teams averaged 8.7 runs and 2.3 home runs per game at the Juice Box. Through last week, the 2007 numbers were 7.96 and 1.9, and hitters were batting just .250 there.

How good will Brewers rookie 3B **Ryan Braun** be this year? Well, he was hitting .342 with a .418 on-base percentage and 10 homers in 117 at-bats at Class AAA Nashville when he was called up. And unlike many current prospects, Braun was not rushed to the majors. He will make an immediate impact by providing fantasy owners with a .300 average, decent power and a few steals. ➤ It should not go unnoticed that a good percentage of today's major league managers are fantasy-friendly. They are honest and open when disclosing who is taking the day off and the identity of a primary closer. Times certainly are different—there are few secrets in the game anymore, and new and old managers alike (from **Ron Washington** to **Jim Leyland**) seem to have accepted that. We fantasy owners appreciate the honesty. —Brendan Roberts



BLOG ALERT

'Sure, we all want things to happen quickly for our fantasy teams, but some Guns N' Roses-style patience is needed with the struggling Yankees.'



George Winkler says trading a slow starter like Bobby Abreu is no way to get your team to Paradise City. Join George in the cyber jungle at sportingnews.com.

JOHN DUINN FOR SN

A.L. EAST

BALTIMORE ORIOLES

RHP **Jeremy Guthrie**, who entered the rotation as an injury fill-in, had a 1.78 ERA in May and has pitched at least seven innings in his past four starts. ... RHP **Chad Bradford** has been used a lot, but his submarine motion doesn't put much strain on his arm and he usually faces only a batter or two per outing. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** The team ranks third in the majors in steals, a product of **Juan Samuel's** aggressive coaching. The 84.6 percent success rate also shows O's runners are smart and fast. —*Spencer Fordin*

NEW YORK YANKEES

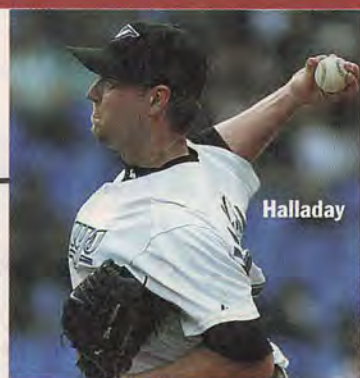
RHP **Roger Clemens'** first start got pushed back, and though his groin injury isn't serious, it underscores the need for realistic expectations for a 44-year-old pitcher. Don't look for him to pitch seven innings too often. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** DH **Jason Giambi's** injured heel was preventing him from driving the ball. His absence will help CF **Johnny Damon**, who has had assorted leg injuries and now will be the primary DH. OF **Melky Cabrera**, who has shown he can provide a spark, will play regularly. —*Bryan Hoch*

BOSTON RED SOX

Pitching coach **John Farrell** has helped RHP **Curt Schilling** rediscover his split-finger pitch. Farrell had Schilling change the grip by a couple of inches, and now the pitch is diving like it did during his big years in Arizona. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** When Boston starts a series, one of its advance scouts meets with the team. Instead of simply reading reports, players can talk to the scout about his observations of the new opponent. The players, including the highly prepared **Jason Varitek**, find the system helpful. —*Ian Browne*

TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS

Look for 3B **Akinori Iwamura** to bat more in the seventh spot than the sixth behind 1B **Carlos Pena**. Manager **Joe Maddon** doesn't want Pena and Iwamura, both left-handers, hitting back-to-back. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** LHP **Scott Kazmir** made a good adjustment during a win over the White Sox. Kazmir, who always has worked with his foot on the third base side of the rubber, moved to the first base side against Chicago. Kazmir said it kept him from opening up his body during his delivery, which led to better control. —*Bill Chastain*



Halladay

NATHAN DENETTE / AP

TORONTO BLUE JAYS

RHP **Brian Wolfe** did not allow a run in spring training and was impressive at Class AAA, which earned him a call-up and a job as a middle reliever in the big leagues. Wolfe credits his success to a new arm slot and an improved cutter. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** RHP **Roy Halladay** wasn't getting the normal bite on his cut fastballs, so C **Sal Fasano** suggested Halladay move his index finger back on the ball so he puts less pressure on his middle finger. Ever since that adjustment, Halladay's cutter has been consistently sharp. —*Jordan Bastian*

A.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO WHITE SOX

Losing supersub **Pablo Ozuna** (leg, ankle) for three months is like losing a starter. Ozuna provided a needed infusion of speed and was a solid leadoff force against the division's tough lefties, such as **Johan Santana** and **C.C. Sabathia**. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** When LHP **Matt Thornton** had frequent bouts of wildness earlier in his career, hitters would usually take a pitch or two. But now they like to pounce on his first delivery, which hurt him early this season. Thornton, though, is adjusting. He has allowed one run in his past 14 outings. —*Scott Merkin*



Thornton

JAY DROWNS / SN

CLEVELAND INDIANS

RHP **Roberto Hernandez** is being used in low-pressure situations because he has lacked command with his fastball. But the team won't give up on its hopes of his becoming a late-inning force because he hasn't lost velocity. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** Many of the team's key offensive players aren't hitting for a high average, but the club ranks second in the majors in runs because of its approach at the plate. Patience is leading to walks, high pitch counts and earlier exits for opposing starters. —*Anthony Castrovine*

KANSAS CITY ROYALS

RHP **Zack Greinke**, who started the season in the rotation, has emerged as a late-inning reliever; his elite stuff yields better results over one or two innings. He still throws his full repertoire, including a mid-90s fastball and a slow curve. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** RHP **David Riske** didn't allow a run in 14 games in May. After a tough April, he noticed on video that his arm slot was allowing batters to pick up the ball early. Riske, whose stuff isn't overpowering, corrected it and created a more deceptive delivery. —*Conor Nicholl*

DETROIT TIGERS

3B **Brandon Inge's** range and agility in the field start with his footwork, which will be hindered by his broken left big toe. An insert in his shoe keeps the toe from bending and is expected to keep Inge off the D.L. The injury shouldn't adversely affect his hitting. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** Gary Sheffield finally has a routine for dealing with life as a DH. With a bat always in his hands, he walks up and down the stairs to the clubhouse—a long trek at Comerica Park—to keep himself warmed up. —*Jason Beck*

MINNESOTA TWINS

SS **Jason Bartlett**, who has struggled with errors, has sought the help of 2B **Luis Castillo**, a former Gold Glover. Bartlett has great range but has had trouble with routine plays. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** LHP **Jason Miller** has given a different look to a bullpen full of relievers who throw 91 to 96 mph. His slower motion has been baffling hitters; he didn't allow a hit in his first three big league appearances. Closer **Joe Nathan** says the movement on Miller's pitches seems to change with each outing. —*Kelly Thesier*

A.L. WEST

LOS ANGELES ANGELS

SS **Orlando Cabrera** is having his finest all-around season. His ability to work the count, spray hits to all fields and hit behind runners makes him an ideal No. 2 hitter in front of OF **Vladimir Guerrero**. Plus, Cabrera is also a candidate for his second Gold Glove. His positioning and anticipation complement hands that are as sure as any in the game.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: With only three A.L. West division rivals, RHP **John Lackey** tries to change patterns regularly and give different looks to hitters who are familiar with him. He is using his changeup and cutter more often, in any count, rather than relying heavily on the two-seamer and curveball in key situations. The results? Lackey was 9-3 with a 2.37 ERA through his first 12 starts this year. —Lyle Spencer



JOHN CORDES FOR SN

OAKLAND ATHLETICS

With OFs **Milton Bradley** and **Mark Kotsay** back, expect 1B **Dan Johnson** to slide into the DH role and **Nick Swisher**, who has been playing a lot in center, to move to first. Swisher is a better defensive first baseman than Johnson. **Jack Cust**, who was a sensation during his first two weeks as the DH, has struggled mightily since.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: The A's use a dramatic shift against certain lefthanded sluggers—something they're comfortable with because 3B **Eric Chavez** still has the instincts and range of a shortstop, the position he played in high school. —Mychael Urban

SEATTLE MARINERS

A key reason for the team's respectable start is the devastating 1-2 late-inning punch of RHP **Brandon Morrow**, who hasn't allowed a run since April 20, and closer **J.J. Putz**, who is 13-for-13 in save chances. ... RHP **Jeff Weaver** opted to prepare for his return from the D.L. by pitching in a simulated game instead of making a rehab assignment. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** With such a long swing, 1B **Richie Sexson** requires more at-bats than most to find a groove—he often needs all of April and much of May. But Sexson is settling in; he's hitting .348 in his past 12 games. —Jim Street

TEXAS RANGERS

Trade talks involving 1B **Mark Teixeira** are likely to heat up. The team is looking for pitching in return. Losing him would be a big blow to the offense, but Teixeira can become a free agent after the 2008 season and has shown no inclination to re-sign with the Rangers. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** RHP **Willie Eyre** is a reliable long reliever because he has developed a split-finger fastball that helps him get out lefthanders, who hit .372 against him in 2006. There has been talk about putting him in the rotation, but manager **Ron Washington** thinks he's more effective where he is. —T.R. Sullivan

N.L. EAST

MLB.com

ATLANTA BRAVES

The Braves likely will shop for pitching. C **Jarrod Saltalamacchia** could help them land a top-caliber starter. ... After being stubborn for seven weeks, CF **Andruw Jones** has started hitting balls the opposite way and showing a more balanced swing. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** Extra hours of infield practice helped 2B **Kelly Johnson** make a smooth transition from the outfield. But coaches want him to cut back the afternoon work to prevent fatigue. Now Johnson limits himself to taking grounders during batting practice. —Mark Bowman

NEW YORK METS

OF **Carlos Gomez** likely will return to the minors when LF **Moises Alou** (quad) and RF **Shawn Green** (foot) come off the D.L. But a case could be made for keeping Gomez; he's better defensively than Alou and Green. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** RHP **John Maine** has struggled locating his fastball in recent starts, but he has gained confidence in his secondary pitches, a slider and a changeup. If his fastball returns to top form, Maine will be closer to the pitcher who won his first five decisions and regularly turned in dominant efforts. —Marty Noble

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

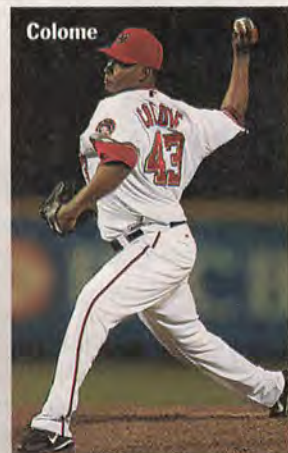
After an inconsistent career with the Devil Rays, RHP **Jesus Colome** has become the Nats' best reliever because he is relying on his slider and changeup instead of throwing nothing but fastballs. He still needs to cut down on walks. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** During spring training, RF **Ryan Langerhans** used a toe tap, similar to what former Braves teammate **Chipper Jones** does. It's a device that is supposed to remind hitters to stay back in the box. The approach worked then but didn't carry over to the regular season; Langerhans was 3-for-48 before joining the Nationals and developed some bad habits at the plate. He now is in a more upright position and is seeing the ball better. He has hit much better since joining the team. —Bill Ladson

FLORIDA MARLINS

RHP **Armando Benitez**, who saved 47 games for the Marlins in 2004, was reacquired from the Giants. At least initially, Benitez will be a setup man. Manager **Fredi Gonzalez** doesn't want to mess with RHP **Kevin Gregg**, who has converted all seven of his save chances. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** Gregg wears sunglasses for night games. Though they don't enhance his vision, they help shield the glare from lights and allow him to better pick up the catcher's signs. Gregg got the idea from some former Angels teammates. —Joe Frisaro

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

Greg Dobbs has worked his way into a regular spot in the lineup, even with 1B **Ryan Howard** back in the middle of the order. Dobbs will continue to play third base against righthanders as long as he remains a consistent threat on offense. He also can play first and the outfield. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** The coaches are teaching **Carlos Ruiz** the nuances of catching—including respecting umpires and framing pitches to try to induce more strike calls. They feel Ruiz needs to be more selective with his timing for questioning calls. —Ken Mandel



BOB LEVERONE / SN

THE CLOSER Todd Jones

A harmless scream? Hah!

Fly balls are hit near us in the bullpen all the time. When they're hit by our guys, we'd love to yell to the other guys, "Hey, I got it," to mess them up. But we never do.

That is one of big league baseball's commandments. Well, Alex Rodriguez broke that commandment in Toronto last week, and, from what I've heard from players, it wasn't the first time he had done something like that.

Even if he didn't yell "I got it," you shouldn't say what he claimed to say—"Hah!"—as he was running toward third base when Blue Jays shortstop John McDonald and third baseman Howie Clark were trying to figure out who was going to catch the popup. It's considered unprofessional.

You can stop in front of an infielder to distract him on a ground ball. You can slide hard into second base to try to break up a double play. An outfielder can try to deke a baserunner. But screaming at the other guys to try



ADRIAN WITOLD / AP

The Jays' McDonald had a right to yell—A-Rod didn't.

to mess them up is taboo.

There are a few reasons:

■ When you think about it, the field of play is basically a quiet place. It's not quite like a golfer teeing off, but in baseball, there are a lot of signs but not a lot of words. There isn't much to say. It's kind of weird.

■ We are taught to block out crowd noise. But if a player runs past you and says

something, it jars you and might make you miss the ball.

■ It's a courtesy opponents extend to you so you don't do it to them. I know guys want to win. Believe me, there's a lot of stuff you can do that's accepted. But if there's a popup on the infield, I'd rather not say a word and lose than try to do something unprofessional so the guy drops it. I'd rather just play the game out and see what happens.

E-mail Todd Jones, a reliever for the Tigers, at tjones@sportingnews.com.

N.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO CUBS

C **Michael Barrett** was having a difficult stretch even before his publicized scuffles with RHP **Carlos Zambrano**. Barrett hasn't been hitting much and has committed some defensive and baserunning blunders. It doesn't help that backup C **Henry Blanco** is on the D.L. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** The team doesn't think LHP **Scott Eyre's** struggles have been caused by a heavy workload the previous three seasons. He didn't pitch for a week, but that was so he could work on the side. Eyre is trying to lean back more in his delivery in an attempt to improve his inconsistent command. —*Carrie Muskat*

MILWAUKEE BREWERS

1B **Prince Fielder** is tied for the major league lead in homers, and coaches think he also can be a regular .300 hitter if he learns to lay off high fastballs. ... OF **Tony Gwynn** doesn't rattle easily. He consistently comes through when hitting with two strikes, with runners in scoring position and late in games. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** In promoting 3B **Ryan Braun** to bolster the offense, the team is sacrificing defense. **Craig Counsell** and **Tony Graffanino** made plays that Braun will not, and their feeds to 2B **Rickie Weeks** were an underappreciated part of a solid double play defense. —*Adam McCahy*

CINCINNATI REDS

With **Ryan Freel** and **Josh Hamilton** out, **Norris Hopper** will play center field and bat leadoff. Hopper hits for average and has good speed but doesn't draw many walks. ... RHP **Kirk Saarloos** was sent to Class AAA with instructions to work on his sinker. He will be used in relief at Louisville. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** RF **Ken Griffey** got a late start in spring training because of a broken hand. The injury forced him to look at more pitches early on, and that patience carried over to the season. Griffey also is going with the pitch more, which allows him to spoil defensive shifts. —*Mark Sheldon*

PITTSBURGH PIRATES

3B **Jose Bautista** is batting leadoff, even though he doesn't have much speed. The move allows CF **Chris Duffy** to hit second, where he is more comfortable and productive. ... LHP **Tom Gorzelanny** has developed into the ace of the staff but still needs to sharpen his breaking ball and pitch more efficiently. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** Manager **Jim Tracy** prefers to have a veteran like SS **Jack Wilson** bat eighth in the order. Tracy shies away from putting a young player there because it's a spot where the opposing pitcher can expand the strike zone and get cheap outs. —*Jenifer Langosch*

HOUSTON ASTROS

RHP **Brad Lidge** seems to have found his stride. In his last 21⅓ innings entering the week, Lidge struck out 32 batters and posted an 0.84 ERA. He has been sticking with his fastball-slider combination and focusing on not flying open in his delivery, which has led to more consistent command of his pitches.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: In an effort to build more consistency in his swing, 1B/OF **Lance Berkman** has been hitting off a tee after batting practice. Though he feels better at the plate, he's still looking for significant results. He says his swing hasn't felt mechanically sound since spring training. —*Alyson Footer*



ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

Closer **Jason Isringhausen** quietly is having an All-Star season. He is feeling good physically after hip problems contributed to a horrible 2006; he even has worked more than one inning at times. His command is much improved. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** With C **Yadler Molina** (wrist) out, the pitchers need to be quicker to the plate and more cognizant of the running game. Backup **Gary Bennett** is a solid fill-in, but Molina has perhaps the best arm in the league. Many of the current starting pitchers are former relievers who don't have much experience worrying about the running game. —*Matthew Leach*



■ It's always fun to reminisce when **Ivan Rodriguez** pays a visit to his old team. You know, take a look back at when Pudge was actually pudgy ... and could still throw out baserunners ... and the Rangers were contenders ... and they had a starting pitcher with a sub-5.00 ERA ...

■ Who would have thought the Pirates would have a superior rotation, a more reliable bullpen and a manager with more job stability? Next thing you know, they'll also have a more realistic shot at the postseason. Oh, wait.

■ The Dodgers will try anything to convince fans to stay past the sixth inning. Welcome to "Carne Asada Sunday," when fans can enjoy postgame soft tacos, listen to mariachi music and watch Wilson Betemit swing and miss 30 consecutive times at a pinata (without a blindfold).



Dream week

June 7-13

THURSDAY, JUNE 7
Tigers at Rangers

FRIDAY, JUNE 8
Devil Rays at Marlins

SATURDAY, JUNE 9
Pirates at Yankees

SUNDAY, JUNE 10
Blue Jays at Dodgers

MONDAY, JUNE 11
White Sox at Phillies

TUESDAY, JUNE 12
Braves at Twins

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13
Cardinals at Royals

■ Who says **Elijah Dukes** is a bad seed? I recently wrote that Dukes is a "big teddy bear" and he e-mailed me a picture of a teddy bear. Sure, that bear was dismembered and boiling in a pot, but it's the thought that counts.



ILLUSTRATION BY SN



WILFREDO LEE / AP

■ **Freddie Garcia** is scheduled to face his former teammates in this series, but the bigger story will be whether White Sox manager **Ozzie Guillen** will

still be fretting about his job security. Hey, Phillies fans, did you realize managers even worried about stuff like that?

■ **Andruw Jones** and **Torii Hunter** are slick-fielding center fielders who don't know much about E's. But they sure seem to know a lot about K's.

■ It'll be kind of like the 1985 World Series: No one outside of Missouri will care. Except this time, not even anyone in Missouri will care. —Chris Bahr



GEORGE WIDMAN / AP

N.L. WEST

MLB.com

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS

1B **Conor Jackson** hit three home runs in May after getting shut out in that category in April, and it's the result of doing a better job of staying back and generating power at the plate. Hitting for average has never been Jackson's problem, but the team wants him to hit more home runs.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME: Mark Reynolds bounced around on defense in the minors—he has played first, second, third and in the outfield—and struggled at times, but he has been surehanded during his time in the majors. With his strong arm, he's well-suited for third. —Steve Gilbert

COLORADO ROCKIES

RF **Brad Hawpe** hit seven homers in his last 14 games of May, including a shot on May 29 against Cardinals LHP **Tyler Johnson** that was his first off a lefty this season. Hawpe has had success by hitting balls to the opposite field or pulling them, depending on pitch location. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** Starting pitchers **Jeff Francis**, **Taylor Buchholz** and **Josh Fogg** have had success improving control with a simple approach. Instead of trying to pinpoint pitches, they aim for more general locations—such as the inside corner of the plate instead of on the paint. —Thomas Harding

SAN DIEGO PADRES

RHP **Scott Linebrink** has been dominant since allowing four home runs in his first 14 innings. The team isn't afraid to give him save chances when RHP **Trevor Hoffman** isn't available. ... Manager **Bud Black** split up RHPs **Justin Germano** and **Greg Maddux** in the rotation because they have similar deliveries. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** RHP **Jake Peavy** has been the N.L.'s top starting pitcher, and one reason for that is he continues to adjust. Peavy has started to use his curveball more because he thought hitters were starting to cheat on his nasty slider. —Corey Brock

LOS ANGELES DODGERS

1B **Nomar Garciaparra** and SS **Rafael Furcal** combined to hit 35 homers last year but had just one through May. Both have still been productive, though. Garciaparra is on pace for just under 100 RBIs despite a 153-at-bat home run drought entering the week, and Furcal is hitting .294. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** **Russell Martin** doesn't fit the catcher mold at the plate. He has eight stolen bases—on pace to set the franchise record for the position—leads the team in RBIs and is a reliable hit-and-run batter. Plus, he's showing more power than he did in the minors. —Ken Gurnick

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

The closer job opened when the team traded embattled RHP **Armando Benitez** to the Marlins. RHP **Brad Hennessey**, the top setup man, is a leading candidate, but manager **Bruce Bochy** could use a closer-by-committee approach based more on game matchups. **SEE A DIFFERENT GAME:** LHP **Barry Zito** is known for his baffling curveball, but he actually has more than one version of the pitch. There's the textbook 12-to-6 break, but he also has one with a sharper break that he uses in certain situations. Both versions, though, are set up with his fastball. —Chris Haft

'If you don't have some boys up front who can handle the load, you're going to struggle on Sunday.' —Russ Grimm

Arizona's O-line is less grim with Grimm

By Dennis Dillon

ddillon@sportingnews.com

At first glance, the Cardinals' offense last year looked like a supercharged SUV. Wide receivers Anquan Boldin and Larry Fitzgerald pumped like high-performance pistons. Running back Edgerrin James conveyed the power of a drive shaft. And once he sat down in the driver's seat, rookie quarterback Matt Leinart looked pretty comfortable with his hand on the gearshift and his foot on the accelerator.

But the line performed like a set of tires with slow leaks, balding tread and mismatched sizes.

So in the offseason, the Cardinals picked up the phone and dialed the Michelin Man. Looking for a better way forward, they hired Russ Grimm. The team's sixth line coach in as many years—"Hopefully it will be a while



For Grimm, rescuing the Cardinals' line is largely about getting the right faces in the right places.

before the seventh one gets here," he says—Grimm came from Pittsburgh as the tag-team partner of new coach Ken Whisenhunt.

Grimm, 48, brings a sparkling resume. He has been an offensive line coach since 1997, with the Redskins (1997-2000) and Steelers (2001-06). During an 11-season playing career as a guard in Washington (1981-91), he was a member of the famed "Hogs" line that helped take the Redskins to four Super Bowls and three championships. He was voted to four Pro Bowls, was a first-team selection on the 1980s all-decade team and was a finalist for the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006.

Because of his experience and background as a former player, Grimm earned instant credibility with the Cardinals' linemen. "That's

tremendous," says guard Reggie Wells. "He not only played, he excelled. He looks like he could still go out there and crack some heads."

Grimm would rather see his linemen get their heads in the right places. To that end, he has had them focusing on two areas during offseason workouts: firing off the ball and getting on the same page. The latter sounds like a cliché, but it takes more than five good players to make a great line. It takes five good players acting in concert.

Each man must know not only who he is supposed to block but also who each of his linemates is responsible for. And when the defense presents a different look—like when it changes its front or brings a safety into the box—the linemen must adjust their blocking assignments accordingly.

The inability to do that consistently was one of the line's problems last season. Another was that it didn't always have players in the right spots.

"A lot of times when you studied their line, you'd say, 'Why is this guy playing here when he's better suited to playing this position?'" says a scout from another NFC West team.

Leonard Davis was a prime example. Because he had played left tackle at Texas and was drafted second overall in 2001, the perception was he would be a fixture at that position for years with the Cardinals. In reality, Davis is a better fit at right tackle or guard, where he is expected to start for the Cowboys next season.

In addition to Davis' exit as a free agent, there were other offseason changes that should improve the line.

■ The team signed center Al Johnson and tackle Mike Gandy, a pair of free agents who are expected to start, and drafted Penn State tackle

A 20 percent retention rate

In addition to new position coach Russ Grimm, the Cardinals' offensive line is expected to have new starters at four of the five positions in 2007. Right guard Deuce Lutui is the only returning starter on a unit with some promise.

LT Mike Gandy. The athletic former Bills guard has started 62 games in the past five seasons. And he's only 28.

LG Reggie Wells. He can play guard and tackle. He's athletic and strong and can run.

C Al Johnson. Grimm has liked this former Cowboy since he came out of Wisconsin in '03.

RG Deuce Lutui. He made nine starts as a rookie and is still developing.

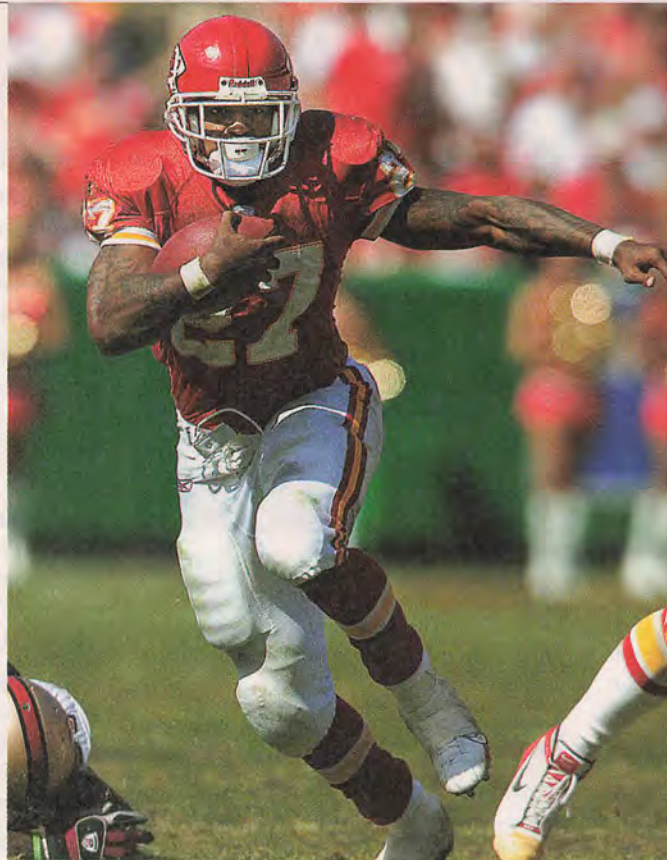
RT Levi Brown. Don't be surprised if the team's first-round draft pick beats out Oliver Ross.



PAUL CONNORS / AP

INSIDE DISH

Lions coach **Rod Marinelli** believes DE **Kalimba Edwards** has the potential to be a dominant pass rusher and has been working closely with the sixth-year player in an attempt to improve his technique. Edwards never has had more than seven sacks in a season and had only three in 2006. Marinelli, who was a defensive line guru as an assistant with the Bucs, believes Edwards has struggled partly because he has a tendency to look at the quarterback before he gets off the line. ➤ WLB **Chad Greenway** has been working with the Vikings' first-team defense and is showing no repercussions from the torn ACL he suffered in last year's opening preseason game that wiped out his rookie season. Greenway, a first-round pick, had been expected to be part of the linebacker rotation and get plenty of playing time last year. He is further along in his development than this year's rookies after going through offseason workouts and part of training camp a year ago. ➤ Protecting QB **Matt Leinart**'s blind side was not the primary reason the Cardinals moved first-round pick **Levi Brown** from left tackle, where he played at Penn State, to right tackle. Most defensive ends on that side tend to be bigger,



Chiefs RB **Larry Johnson** had an NFL-record 416 rushes along with 41 receptions in 2006. Don't be surprised if the first number goes down and the second goes up in 2007. The Chiefs would like to get Johnson more involved in the passing game for two reasons: It would set up some possible mismatches in the open field and would reduce the number of direct hits on Johnson. More catches for Johnson also could mean more carries for RB **Michael Bennett**, who is more of a perimeter runner than Johnson and would provide a change of pace.

stouter run stoppers, and the Cardinals believe putting Brown (6-5, 323) at right tackle gives them a more physical run blocker at the position. Brown is backing up **Oliver Ross**—for now. ➤ **Matt Wilhelm** and **Stephen Cooper** are trying to fill two big holes in the middle of the Chargers' defense left by the departures of ILBs **Donnie Edwards** and **Randall Godfrey**. Wilhelm and Cooper have several characteristics the Chargers like: youth, athleticism,

intelligence and instincts. Both players earned their stripes primarily as special teams players last year, though Wilhelm did a decent job in coverage in the team's nickel and dime packages. ➤ Jets LT **D'Brickashaw Ferguson** has had a good offseason and currently weighs in the mid-290s, just a few pounds less than the Jets would like. The bigger concern is whether Ferguson can keep the weight on consistently during the season. He was unable to do that as a rookie and wore down a bit late in the year.

Levi Brown with its first-round pick. With Milford Brown and Nick Leckey (a combined 23 starts in '06) now backups, the depth should be stronger.

■ Whisenhunt brought in former Browns assistant John Lott as his strength and conditioning coach, and the Cardinals forked over \$200,000 to refurbish their weight room.

■ The linemen have lightened their load. Since February, starting guard Deuce Lutui has shed 30 pounds (down to 335) and backup Elton Brown has lost almost 40.

But the change that should have the biggest impact is Grimm's arrival. At practice a few weeks ago, the offensive and defensive linemen had a punt catching contest. The first ball that shot skyward out of the Juggs machine was caught by Grimm, who didn't even have to move.

The Cardinals are hoping he will have that kind of magic touch on their O-line. **SN**

speedreads



MARK HUMPHREY / AP

Running back **LenDale White** showed up for the Titans' offseason program at a plump 260 pounds. Then he pulled a hamstring. Then he was late returning to workouts after Memorial Day weekend. I could be wrong, but that's probably not the best way to Jeff Fisher's heart.

Why don't teams flip-flop their defensive ends more often during games? It's understandable that a player would be more comfortable lining up on one side than the other, but imagine what kind of competitive advantage it might give him if he occasionally moved to the other side and went up

against a lineman who doesn't usually face an elite pass rusher.

If I'm Steelers offensive line coach Larry Zierlein, I'm being cautious—very cautious—before hitting the send button on my laptop.

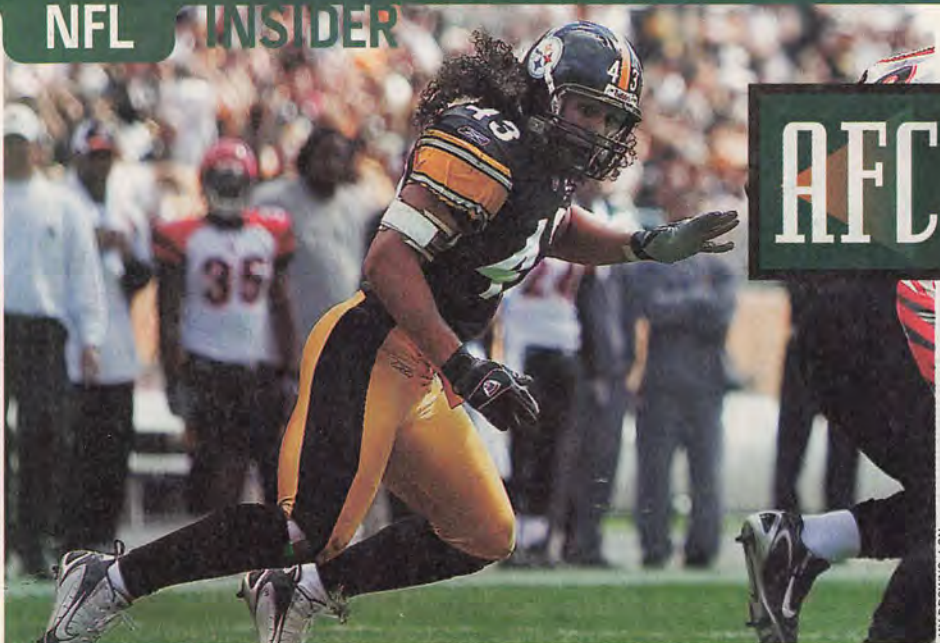
BLOG ALERT

'I'm not going to be the one to draft Clinton Portis in the first round and spend the entire season holding my breath.'

Portis' injury history gives Rob Hurtt the willies. Do you have the stomach to make Portis your top fantasy pick? Weigh in at sportingnews.com.

AFC

FOCUS ON



JAY DROWNS / SN

Once Polamalu locks on to his target, there's sure to be a nasty conclusion.

1 STEELERS Troy Polamalu is a top-line playmaker who can do it all. Anthony Smith, who is athletic and instinctive, must do a good job of covering deep when Polamalu freelances.

2 RAVENS Ed Reed might be the best free safety in the game. He can cover receivers, deliver devastating blows and rush the passer. Dawan Landry, also a heavy hitter, likely will have more coverage responsibilities this year.

3 COLTS Bob Sanders is one of the league's true difference-makers at the position, and Antoine Bethea is coming off a solid rookie season. Depth is a concern.

4 JETS The team has a young, talented duo in Kerry Rhodes and Erik Coleman. Rhodes can make plays behind the line and in deep coverage.

5 BRONCOS John Lynch, 35, and Nick Ferguson, 32, aren't going to be fooled often, given their experience. Both are aggressive tacklers against the run, but neither is particularly rangy in coverage.

6 BROWNS Sean Jones, the team's best defender in 2006, is a reliable tackler and an athletic cover man. Brodney Pool is strong enough to handle the run and agile enough to play corner.

TOP5

1. Troy Polamalu, Steelers. He might be the most disruptive defensive player in the league. He's a strong safety who hits like a linebacker and covers the field like a free safety.

2. Ed Reed, Ravens. Few safeties can dominate like Reed. He has excellent ball skills and does a great job of baiting quarterbacks into making bad decisions. One issue: He tends to freelance too much.

3. Kerry Rhodes, Jets. He has developed into a two-way force. Rhodes is dangerous near the line, especially as a blitzer, and has a lot of range as a deep cover man.

4. John Lynch, Broncos. Lynch has lost some range and playmaking ability but compensates with unmatched savvy. He is a natural leader who makes Denver's young players better.

5. Bob Sanders, Colts. A big hitter who provides an emotional boost to the defense, he was a catalyst in the team's Super Bowl run. His lack of durability continues to be a concern.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

7 PATRIOTS Rodney Harrison remains one of the most feared players in the game, but health issues are taking their toll on him. If Asante Samuel holds out, Eugene Wilson might be forced to play corner.

8 RAIDERS Michael Huff has the speed, intelligence and instincts to develop into a Pro Bowl player. Stuart Schweigert doesn't excel in any one area but has a knack for getting to the ball.

9 JAGUARS Donovan Darius is a punishing hitter but struggles in coverage. Gerald Sensabaugh is an aggressive run stopper, but rookie playmaker Reggie Nelson likely will take his job.

10 CHARGERS Marlon McCree, a strong leader and communicator with above-average skills, is the unit's only proven impact player. Clinton Hart could be a hidden gem with his instincts and ball skills.

11 TITANS Chris Hope became the leader of the unit in his first season with the team. Calvin Lowry and Vincent Fuller will challenge Lamont Thompson for the other starting spot.

12 BENGALS Madiou Williams is a playmaker, and Dexter Jackson is a physical player with good range. Overall, this unit needs to communicate better.

13 BILLS Donte Whitner has good speed but tends to be too aggressive in run support. Ko Simpson excels in deep coverage but needs to improve his tackling.

14 CHIEFS Jarrad Page is smart but needs to tackle better. Bernard Pollard is a big hitter but lacks speed. Greg Wesley appears to lose concentration frequently. The rub: Two of them have to start.

15 DOLPHINS The team did nothing to upgrade this unit in the offseason. Jeremiah Bell provides some hitting ability over the middle. Renaldo Hill makes good decisions but is hindered by a lack of open-field speed.

16 TEXANS Glenn Earl and C.C. Brown are strong against the run, but their coverage skills are shaky. Dexter McCleon and Von Hutchins could challenge Brown for the starting free safety job.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

AFETIES

NFC

1 CARDINALS Adrian Wilson is one of the most versatile players in the league; he can cover slot receivers and play back in coverage or near the line of scrimmage. Terrence Holt should be adept at directing coverage from the free safety spot.

2 COWBOYS The team insists it will play Roy Williams close to the line of scrimmage to let him be a playmaker without having so many coverage responsibilities. In turn, Ken Hamlin will make sure everyone gets lined up properly.

3 VIKINGS Darren Sharper still is one of the NFL's smartest players and takes chances to make big plays. Dwight Smith plays with emotion and hits hard but must work on his tackling technique.

4 EAGLES Brian Dawkins still plays at an elite level. Sean Considine has put on weight in order to get better near the line of scrimmage.

5 REDSKINS Sean Taylor has elite speed and delivers massive hits but gambles too much. Rookie LaRon Landry also is a big hitter but will take time to adjust.

6 49ERS Michael Lewis is a bruising presence. He can be vulnerable in coverage, but that is the strength of Mark Roman, who consistently hassles receivers.

7 BEARS If Mike Brown stays healthy, this unit will be strong. Neither he nor Adam Archuleta excels in coverage, but Brown has good instincts and plays the ball well.

8 FALCONS Lawyer Milloy, 33, can still pack a wallop and is strong in run support. Jimmy Williams and Chris Crocker, both of whom struggle in coverage, will compete at free safety.

9 SEAHAWKS Free-agent acquisitions Deon Grant and Brian Russell, both of whom showed good communication and cover skills in minicamp, likely will start. Michael Boulware and Mike Green provide solid depth.

10 RAMS Corey Chavous, 31, remains a capable performer on the field and a valuable leader off it. O.J. Atogwe looked lost early last season but has playmaking skills that give him a big upside.

11 SAINTS Kevin Kaesviharn will make an instant impact as a coach-on-the-field type. With Roman Harper returning from a torn ACL, Josh Bullocks must improve to keep his starting job.

12 GIANTS Gibril Wilson has plenty of speed and hits hard but often looks tentative. The same goes for Will Dumps, who was slowed by a knee injury last season.

13 PACKERS Nick Collins is versatile but has to take better angles and anticipate plays better. Marquand Manuel needs to be replaced by a younger player such as Marviel Underwood or Aaron Rouse.

14 LIONS Kenoy Kennedy and Daniel Bullocks are decent in run support but give up big plays. Rookie Gerald Alexander could get some playing time if he exhibits better ball skills on deep routes.



MICHAEL MCNAMARA / SN ARCHIVES

TOP5

1. Adrian Wilson, Cardinals. Offenses have to game-plan for his every move. Not only is he a devastating run defender and excellent blitzzer, he is a much-improved cover guy.

2. Roy Williams, Cowboys. He is a big-time tackler and playmaker who can separate the ball from ballcarriers. He also is smart and seldom gets out of position.

3. Brian Dawkins, Eagles. Every team wants a player like Dawkins anchoring its defense. Though he's 33, Dawkins still covers lots of ground and is an intimidating presence in the middle.

4. Darren Sharper, Vikings. Sharper has lost a step, but he's still a dangerous ballhawk. He uses his height, leaping ability and ball skills to make plays.

5. Sean Taylor, Redskins. He is as talented as any free safety in the league. He has great range and is capable of delivering devastating blows, but he tends to bite on play fakes.

15 BUCCANEERS Jermaine Phillips has not made anyone forget about John Lynch, and Will Allen has proved only that his insertion into the starting lineup may have been premature.

16 PANTHERS The team needs an upgrade because Nate Salley has no significant experience and limited upside and Mike Minter has lost a step and is headed into the final season of his career.



ROBERT SEALE / SN ARCHIVES

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

NFL INSIDE THE AFC

CHIEFS DE **Tamba Hall** recorded eight sacks as a rookie because he is relentless and a great finisher when he gets to the quarterback. Now he needs to get stronger and refine his technique to become an even more dynamic pass rusher. It also would help if the interior of the line got more of a push. ... **CHARGERS** WR **Vincent Jackson** needs to do a better job of using his size (6-5, 238) to win jump balls. He is capable of playing physical; he already is the most aggressive blocker among the team's receivers. ... DE **Earl Cochran** played only in the **TEXANS'** final game last season, but he's making a push to be a part of the line rotation. In workouts, Cochran (6-5, 272) has used his athleticism to hustle to the ball and his size to bat down passes. ... Look for rookie WR **Johnnie Lee Higgins** to

make the **RAIDERS** as a return man. His great speed gives him the ability to break a big gain at any time. Plus that would allow **Chris Carr** to stay fresh for his duties as a cornerback in passing situations. ... Part of **JETS** rookie **Darrelle Revis'** NFL initiation is learning to cover slot receivers. He is working with the nickel package as the inside corner; he has the strength and toughness to handle the extra banging that takes place closer to the ball. ... **STEELERS** QB **Ben Roethlisberger** has been a regular at offseason workouts and is determined to rebound from a down 2006. He is working a

lot in the no-huddle offense, a wrinkle new coordinator **Bruce Arians** wants to use more this season. ... **BILLS** backup DE **Anthony Hargrove** comes off the ball with excellent quickness, which allows him to beat blockers off the edge. But he has trouble against the run when he doesn't play with leverage and is vulnerable on misdirection runs because he tends to be overaggressive. ... **JAGUARS** rookie DE **Brian Smith**, whose college career ended when he broke his hip, is projected to be ready for training camp and could contribute significantly. At 6-4, 230, Smith will struggle against the run, but he was drafted specifically to upgrade the pass rush. ... RB **Kenton Keith**, a former CFL standout, has impressed coaches during the **COLTS'** workouts and could serve as the backup to **Joseph Addai**. Keith has displayed a nice burst and good cutting ability; he describes himself as a home run back. ... RB **Chris Henry** has displayed the speed, quickness and good hands that convinced the **TITANS** to draft him, but he needs to



TODD WARSHAW FOR SN

Jackson is a big guy but still needs to be a big-play guy.

do a better job recognizing where to run the ball on some plays. He hasn't always hit the hole as quickly as he needs to. ... FB **Stan White**, an undrafted free agent, has a good chance to make the **BENGALS**. His ability to go in motion and catch passes out of the backfield is a plus, and he brings intensity as a lead blocker. White must show he can contribute on special teams. ... It wouldn't be surprising to see **RAVENS** rookie WR **Yamon Figurs** become the primary punt and kickoff returner. **B.J. Sams** hasn't fully recovered from a broken leg, and he doesn't have the speed of Figurs, who can blow past people. ... Playing opposite **Champ Bailey**, new **BRONCOS** CB **Dre' Bly** will have plenty of opportunities to create turnovers, and that's what he does best. New coordinator **Jim Bates** likes to use a lot of bump-and-run with his corners, and Bly excels in press coverage. ... **DOLPHINS** rookie **Samson Satele** is the favorite to start at center, with **Rex Hadnot** moving to guard. Satele brings an aggressive nature that the unit needs, but he must hold up as a run blocker after playing in a pass-heavy system at Hawaii.

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

New Browns wide receivers coach **Wes Chandler** is trying to improve the hands and concentration of **Braylon Edwards**, who has dropped too many balls, and **Joshua Cribbs**, who was a quarterback in college. In one drill, the receiver must snatch the ball a few inches from the ground. In another, the receiver has his back to the passer and must turn and make a split-second catch after a coach yells "ball." It's clear Chandler has an edgier teaching style than predecessor **Terry Robiskie**.



Chandler is trying to make sure that when the ball hits Edwards' hands, it stays there.



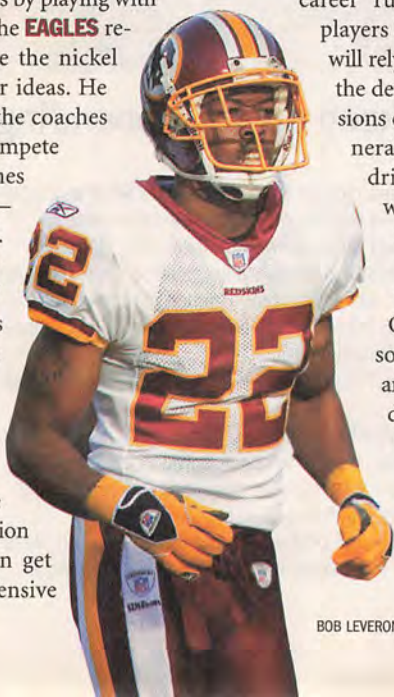
BOB LEVERONE / SN

Thomas rarely stands pat

During a recent practice session, the Patriots' **Adalius Thomas** played all over the field, which is similar to what he did with the Ravens. He spent much of his time at weakside inside linebacker, which freed **Mike Vrabel** to play on the outside where he's most comfortable. Thomas has played mostly on the outside, but he has the prototypical size (6-2, 270) to play inside in the Pats' system. He also spent some time playing 3 technique tackle in the 2-minute defense, dropping into coverage and manning every linebacker spot.

INSIDE THE NFC

Though **PANTHERS** rookie WR **Dwayne Jarrett** is running with the backups for now, there's little question he'll be a starter. The team needs a consistent complement to WR **Steve Smith**, and **Drew Carter** and **Keary Colbert** haven't shown they're ready to be more than role players. Jarrett (6-4, 214) has excellent size and good hands. ... After ranking 31st with 19 takeaways last season, the **SAINTS** must improve in that area. They hope three free-agent pickups—MLB **Brian Simmons**, S **Kevin Kaesviharn** and CB **Jason David**—will have an impact. The trio had 10 interceptions combined in 2006; the entire Saints defense had 11. ... **VIKINGS** DE **Kenechi Udeze**, who went sackless last year, has been bumped from the first unit during spring drills. Udeze tends to be too focused on his contain responsibilities and lacks instincts as a pass rusher. ... The **SEAHAWKS'** decision to release CB **Kelly Herndon**, who started 16 games in 2006, means the team is handing a starting job to second-year player **Kelly Jennings** and the nickel job to rookie **Josh Wilson**. Though both lack size, they have the speed to run with the NFL's fastest receivers. Both have been impressive in spring drills. ... Undrafted WR **Drisan James** (5-11, 185) has been impressive in **BEARS** workouts. He lacks size but possesses big-play ability and can make plays after the catch. ... CB **Alan Zemaity** will be a player to watch at **BUCS** camp. He was a standout at last year's camp but missed 2006 with a shoulder injury. Zemaity lacks ideal speed, but his ability to close quickly on receivers reminds the coaches of **Ronde Barber**. ... **49ERS** rookie **Joe Cohen** is expected to compete for playing time at nose tackle behind **Aubrayo Franklin**. Cohen is not particularly athletic but compensates by playing with leverage and intensity. ... The **EAGLES** resigned **William James** to be the nickel corner, but James has other ideas. He says he plans to start, and the coaches will give him a chance to compete against **Sheldon Brown**. James has good size (6-0, 200)—something the Eagles need. The **CARDINALS'** red zone efficiency could increase if TE **Leonard Pope** develops as a blocker. At 6-8, Pope is a nice target near the goal line. But if opponents aren't concerned about his blocking, he'll have a hard time releasing from the line and getting open on play-action passes. ... If the **RAMS** can get better play from their defensive



BOB LEVERONE / SN



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN ARCHIVES

Hawk just might have it covered

If minicamps and organized team activities are a barometer, Packers second-year WLB **A.J. Hawk** appears to be taking the necessary steps toward becoming a playmaker. Hawk's biggest weakness last year was man-to-man coverage, so it's significant when he intercepts a couple of passes in practice. He has the body control to avoid penalties in coverage and the athletic ability to get in position for picks. The fifth overall pick in the 2006 draft, Hawk is being counted on to be more than just a solid player.

tackles, MLB **Will Witherspoon** could make a run at a Pro Bowl berth. Witherspoon (6-1, 230) is small for the middle and needs his tackles to keep blockers off him so he can get to the ball. He excels in coverage and has superior range. ... **COWBOYS** QB **Tony Romo** says he already has a good feel for the plays new coordinator **Jason Garrett** will call in specific situations. Under Garrett, the passing game will be more timing-based, which should benefit Romo because he's so accurate. ... Though FB **Ovie Mughelli** was signed because of his lead-blocking ability, the **FALCONS** plan to give him some carries. They hope Mughelli can be a short-yardage option—something they didn't have in '06 after trading **T.J. Duckett**. Mughelli has power but only 12 career rushes. ... **GIANTS** defensive players like the fact the new scheme will rely heavily on the 4-3. Last year, the defense made use of hybrid versions of the 3-4, which made it vulnerable to outside runs and long drives. By sticking to the 4-3, where the linebackers can get help from the ends, the Giants expect fewer monster drives. ... The **REDSKINS** need CB **Carlos Rogers** to put his sophomore slump behind him and play with the confidence he displayed as a rookie in 2005. He can be a solid No. 2 corner but must do a better job in press coverage.

Rogers must learn how to press—without pressing.



CARLOS OSORIO / AP

Drilling for turnovers

The Lions were tied for 10th in the league in takeaways with 30 last season, but that wasn't good enough for coach **Rod Marinelli**. In offseason workouts, he has increased the emphasis on going after the ball. All of the defensive players are participating in a sack drill in which they come off the corners and aim for the quarterback's arm—not the ball—because it's a bigger target and often produces the same result. They also are being taught to punch at the ball in team drills—even after a play is over—so they get in the habit of doing it.

Some players still are sitting on the fence. Are they ready for the NBA?

Work the system—even if it isn't working for you

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

The seconds are lapsing as Marquette guard Dominic James bounces the basketball near the top of the key. His team is down a basket. This is his chance to change that. He dashes to the left side of the lane and draws a defender away from the perimeter, but the spacing isn't right. The action gets clogged, and James' team manages only a couple of forced attempts at tying the score.

During his week at the NBA predraft camp in Orlando, not a lot is going right for James. He is struggling to make things happen, to demonstrate he is a pro-level point guard. At least he is here.

This wasn't always a given despite James' collegiate cachet. First pegged as a camp alternate, he squeezed onto the roster only after several higher-rated prospects withdrew. But, more to the point, if he were a wide receiver instead of a point guard, he'd never be presented this opportunity.

College coaches loathe the uncertainty that comes with the test-the-waters element of the NBA draft process. In football, a player considering the draft is either in or out. There is no "almost pregnant" element as there is for basketball players, who have the luxury of discovering how the draft process works—even if, at the moment, it might not be working for them.

"This lets you step outside your boundaries from college and see the opportunities you have to play at the next level," says Georgetown forward Jeff Green, the reigning Big East player of the year who surprised reporters by announcing



JOHN RAUX / AP

he had not hired an agent and still was considering returning to the Hoyas. "Even if you come back to school, it prepares you for the next year."

But there is a widespread belief, especially among players, that retreating to college after entering the draft is tantamount to surrender. Call it the Darius Washington Syndrome. However, many who have withdrawn from the early-entry list have wound up delivering productive

college seasons and building the foundation for solid NBA careers.

Kentucky center Jamaal Magloire became a top 20 pick in 2000 after an unimpressive dalliance with the previous year's draft. Saint Joseph's guard Jameer Nelson won the Oscar Robertson trophy as player of the year after he postponed his NBA dream a year. Washington's Nate Robinson, Providence's Ryan Gomes and UK's Keith Bogans returned to spectacular success after competing in the predraft camp and discovering they would not be guaranteed advantageous draft positions.

This is why current Washington center Spencer Hawes has yet to announce a firm decision. He recognizes he is not a fully formed NBA player after one season with

James (left) and Nevada's Ramon Sessions wanted to show they could play point in the NBA. Will it happen this year or next?

Jones needs to keep up his rebounding

Joseph Jones was here.

It seemed there should be some record of this because his week at the NBA predraft camp was so quiet no one might have remembered otherwise.

An unassuming 6-9, 250-pound power forward for Texas A&M, Jones averaged 13.4 points last season and graciously allowed senior teammate Acie Law to overshadow him. In Jones' first game at the Orlando camp, he again was pushed to the background, with 6-10 Winthrop power forward Craig Bradshaw getting most of the low-post opportunities.

"It's not frustrating," Jones says. "You have to be a great teammate and just go rebound the missed shots."

That's where Jones can improve. After getting two rebounds in his first camp game, he grabbed seven in the second and fell back to two in the third. That continued a pattern of inconsistency. He had five double-figures rebounding games last season and six games with four or fewer.

He is a skilled offensive player in the post and facing the basket. But at his size, Jones must focus on hitting the boards. It's the best way to get himself noticed.



PAUL ZOELLER / AP

the Huskies. "That's the big question: Where does that improvement lie? Where does it come from?" he says. "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

Hawes was planning to take a final exam in a UW class called Sociology of Murder earlier this week and then hop on a plane for Minnesota to work out for the Timberwolves. He also had try-outs scheduled for Chicago and Sacramento.

The NBA changed rules this year to allow individual teams to work out players only after the conclusion of the predraft camp. With the withdrawal deadline following on June 18, there basically are 16 days for prospects to do team workouts before making up their minds whether to remain in the draft or give the old college another try.

"There is a window, and you have to take advantage of it," Hawes says. There is no guarantee he will choose the right answer. The most important thing is he gets to call the play. **SN**

BLOG ALERT

'The Badgers need buckets. That's about as sophisticated as the analysis needs to be.'

Mike DeCourcy pegs the guy who has to fill it up this season for Wisconsin to continue its reign as one of the Big Ten's powers. Tell him if you agree at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

The last piece of fallout from the Illinois-Indiana Eric Gordon saga—Gordon committed to the Illini, then signed with the Hoosiers—is a new Big Ten rule prohibiting league members from recruiting players who are publicly committed to a conference school. If a coach gets a call from someone else's recruit, he must report that to his rival.

USA Basketball didn't get all the top talent for the under-19 World Championship because some players were interested in individual development or summer school. But college veterans Raymar Morgan of Michigan State and Darrell Arthur of Kansas give the team muscle, and shooters Stephen Curry of Davidson and Patrick Beverley of Arkansas provide some outside punch. Winning this tournament would be a significant achievement.

More evidence Ohio State coach Thad Matta is ahead of the competition: He hired star-quality recruiter Archie Miller away from Arizona State. Matta will lose highly regarded assistant John Groce soon, but until then, Groce can help Miller learn the Buckeyes way.



JAY DROWNS / SN

INSIDE DISH

It won't hurt Kansas to wait for SF **Brandon Rush** to recover from offseason knee surgery. Were it not for his torn ACL, Rush would have competed at the predraft camp and might have remained on the NBA draft early-entry list. However, if Rush's preseason practices are limited, it might be tougher for KU coach **Bill Self** to work in any new schemes that would use a four-small alignment. That's something he is considering given the presence of three gifted guards—**Mario Chalmers**, **Russell Robinson** and **Sherron Collins**—and Rush.

Virginia PG **Sean Singletary** was solid at the NBA predraft camp but missed the chance to be exceptional. He consistently was able to penetrate the lane but shot only 8-of-22 from the floor, attempted four free throws and had a combined 10 assists. "I definitely could get my shot any time I wanted to, but I was trying to get everybody else involved," he says. "I didn't want to dominate the ball too much." Singletary worked about two weeks before the camp with personal coach **John Lucas** in Houston. Whether Singletary stays in the draft or returns to the Cavs, this will be the first summer in many years he has been able to work on his game. He was recuperating from surgery each of the past two summers. ➤ Nevada PG **Ramon Sessions** had an impressive performance, which included averages of 13.3 points and 4.0 assists. Sessions got the luxury of playing with Pack teammate SG **Marcelus Kemp**, and that familiarity paid off for both; Kemp hit double figures in every game. Sessions says he does not need to be a first-round pick to remain on the early-entry list. "If I can get a guarantee, period, that's what I'm looking for," he says. "If it's not the right time for me, I'll come back without a problem." ➤ Although he is still developing, Clemson C **James Mays** isn't

far off in comparing his style of play to that of Phoenix Suns superstar **Amare Stoudemire**. "He's athletic, plays the four or five, really doesn't have a position but goes hard all the time," Mays says. He'll never reach the same level as Stoudemire, but Mays played with great energy and produced as a scorer and rebounder at the predraft camp. There's a spot for him in the league, though he might have a better shot at the first round in the 2008 draft. ➤ With all the talent Memphis has, the preliminary plan is to employ a two-platoon system in early games and try to wear out opponents by pressing, driving and shooting 3s. Eventually, though, the Tigers will provide a greater share of the minutes to freshman PG **Derrick Rose** and junior SF **Chris Douglas-Roberts**, who will be the key components on what could be the program's first preseason No. 1 team. ➤ The committee working to compose a set of standards for Atlantic 10 programs is planning to meet by phone or in person almost on a monthly basis as it tries to establish a path for the league to return to prominence. There was a promising response to the idea of requiring members to show commitment to improving their programs at the league meetings in Florida last month.

The Troy 10? Those would be the tailbacks—seven of them freshmen or sophomores—on the Trojans' depth chart.

USC's pitch: Come here to compete with the best

By Matt Hayes

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Todd McNair is driving and talking and recruiting. He's always recruiting. Running backs, wide receivers, defensive backs. Even occasional doubters.

How in the world does Southern California, with a depth chart that wound up 10 deep—yep, that's 10 deep—at tailback, convince high school All-American to sign with the school and believe, beyond a doubt, they'll play from the moment they step on the field?

"None of these guys are afraid of competition," says McNair, USC's running backs coach and special teams coordinator.

What other reason could there be? The No. 1 recruiting pitch most coaches use when selling their programs is playing time. Come to State U. and if you work hard enough, you'll play right away.

McNair and the USC staff said those identical words to four high school All-American tailbacks in 2006 and got every one to sign. A year later, they said the same thing to three more high school All-American tailbacks,



McKnight (4) won't get lost in USC's long line of talented tailbacks. He has Reggie Bush-type speed.

including consensus No. 1 recruit Joe McKnight. All three signed with USC to push the tailback depth chart to ridiculous proportions going into fall camp.

How deep, you say? If forced to choose between USC's 10 or the rest of the Pac-10 tailbacks combined, no coach in his right mind walks away from the Troy 10.

"You would think," says one Pac-10 coach,

"one or two of those guys would see the numbers game and go somewhere else."

Why would they when they hear McNair, the ultimate NFL overachiever, constantly chirping in their ears? Here's a guy who played eight years in the NFL by doing anything and everything he could to stick. He was a lead blocker, a special teams ace, a third-down back. You name it, he did it—and always had a roster spot when The Turk showed up.

"I know what these kids are thinking, what they're feeling about competition," McNair says. "When I was in Kansas City, we had Christian Okoye and Barry Word, and then we drafted Harvey Williams in the first round. Those guys were great friends of mine—and I watched all of them clean out their lockers."

Translation: Why would any other player at your position scare you from competing? It's an easy sell for McNair when you think about it. USC clearly is the nation's most talented team, yet 15 true freshmen played last season—including all four tailbacks. Everyone got his chance.

So it's not so hard to see why McKnight, who grew up an hour outside Baton Rouge and LSU, chose to go cross-country and jump into the toughest and deepest position competition in the nation. Even though five-star tailback recruits Marc Tyler and Broderick Green already were on board at USC. Even though all three players would be stacked behind the class of 2006 (C.J. Gable, Emmanuel Moody, Allen Bradford, Stafon Johnson).

"If you make it here," McKnight says, "you know you're the best."

Who can doubt that? **SN**



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speedread

Joe Paterno will discipline a few wayward players by making the entire Penn State team clean Beaver Stadium after a game. I'm usually a believer in game suspensions, but this is actually more punitive: your teammates serving your punishment with you. Who says the old guy has lost touch?

There were some contentious moments last week when SEC coaches voted against an early signing period. Says one league coach: "We had a chance to change policy; everyone else in the country would've followed. Unfortunately, there are a few of us who want to push the envelope every year and see how much they can get away with." Proponents of the legislation say an early signing period in September would allow players who have signed to focus on their senior seasons and schoolwork and would prevent schools from continuing to recruit them. Nearly 40 percent of the Rivals.com top 100 prospects for 2008 already have orally committed to schools. ➤ Look for **Zach Frazer**, the odd man

INSIDE DISH

out in the Notre Dame quarterback competition, to transfer this summer. Frazer was coach **Charlie Weis'** first quarterback recruit and committed to the Irish in spring 2005, months before his senior season and just when his stock was beginning to rise. Frazer chose Notre Dame over Penn State, and the Lions likely will lead the process this time around. ➤ Either everyone missed on North Carolina QB **T.J. Yates** in 2006, or the Tar Heels' quarterback situation is desperate. Yates was a two-star recruit in '06, and his only scholarship offer was from UNC. He beat out **Cam Sexton** in spring practice for the lead going into fall camp, where heralded recruit **Mike Paulus** will enter the mix.

DEI needs to make a statement—by locking up a big name for 2008 and doing it soon.

No driver, no sponsor, no problem? Not so fast

By Bob Pockrass

Dale Earnhardt Inc. officials have preached to anyone who will listen that their company will motor on despite the departure of Dale Earnhardt Jr.

In the month that has passed since Earnhardt revealed he wouldn't be back next season, DEI has announced a merger of its engine department with Richard Childress Racing's, and, well, that's really about it.

No sponsor yet. And no driver.

Although those two things often are related—a commitment of \$15 million to \$20 million usually gives a sponsor the right to veto a potential driver—DEI needs to sign a driver as soon as possible. It needs a face to back up its words that it will not crumble.

It needs a big name to carry the banner, someone who has won at the Nextel Cup level. It has Martin Truex in the fold, and though he



Truex (center) isn't ready to lead DEI to the promised land when Earnhardt leaves, but a guy like Biffle (right) would give the organization some oomph.

is a talent, he needs to win a few Cup races before he can be considered a driver a team can rest its future on.

So where does DEI turn? Likely to a driver who already is under contract somewhere else. Because all the drivers are independent contractors, there are virtually no rules against

tampering in the NASCAR garage. If a driver or owner wants to get out of a deal, it might not be easy, but it usually gets done.

The most notable candidate appears to be Greg Biffle, who is under contract with Roush Racing through next year and is negotiating an extension. But if those talks fall through, the No. 8 car—will DEI really keep that number or change it to ease the pressure on the new driver?—will be there if Biffle chooses to leave Roush behind.

Biffle flirted with DEI a few years ago, and he might be the most talented driver available. It is questionable, though, whether he would mesh well at DEI. He would get along with the drivers for sure, but his tendency to speak his mind could gnaw at the DEI brain trust.

Ryan Newman's name has been mentioned, although he says he's happy at Penske Racing and plans to stick around. But things haven't gone well for him the past two seasons, and it might be best if both sides go their separate ways. The No. 12 team needs to show improvement—and we're not talking a pole here or there—for Newman and Penske to think they can be championship contenders.

Brian Vickers has only one Cup win on his resume but could be a candidate, considering Team Red Bull has struggled so much in its first season. Even though Vickers has a multiyear contract, there likely is an out for a driver who is 40th in points.

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How about Evernham Motorsports drivers Elliott Sadler and Kasey Kahne? Both seem happy enough, but their teams are struggling. Sadler is a Southern guy who could handle the pressure of sliding into the No. 8 and bring his own fan base. It would be a surprise if Kahne, who has seven Cup wins and a long-term deal, left Evernham.

DEI says there has been interest from top drivers. We'll find out whether it can convince any of them that it is an organization worth driving for. **SN**

Bob Pockrass is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Pockrass at scenedaily.com.

SPEED reads

The Nextel Cup series visits no track anything like Pocono, the triangle-shaped site of this weekend's race. But that doesn't mean teams can't apply what they learn at Pocono elsewhere. Look for drivers who are good coming off of Pocono's tight corners also to be good at Indy and the two road courses.

While we're on the subject, those drivers likely will be Denny Hamlin, Tony Stewart, Jimmie Johnson, Kevin Harvick and Jeff Gordon. Stewart will win at Pocono.

The next several races are at diverse tracks, so expect the distance between the solid teams and the wannabes to grow. By the end of the Pepsi 400 (July 7 at Daytona), there should be no more flukes in the top 12.

Good for **Michael Waltrip**, who qualified for the Cup race at Dover, his first since the season-opening Daytona 500. Meanwhile, rumors continue to swirl about mergers and acquisitions involving his team. Who in his right mind would hook up with an organization that rarely qualifies for races?

—Matt Crossman



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

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Blaney

INSIDE DISH

Bill Davis Racing released crew chief **Kevin Hamlin** last weekend at Dover—the day after **Dave Blaney** failed to qualify for the race. **Tommy Baldwin**, the competition director for BDR, will call the shots on Blaney's No. 22 Toyota until a replacement is found. It was Blaney's second miss of the season, and owner **Bill Davis** said the team was not reaching its potential. No Toyota driver is in the top 35 in points, but more was expected of the No. 22 because the team, even though it raced Dodges last year, returned almost intact. All of the other Toyota teams started from scratch. Baldwin had served as crew chief for Blaney's teammate, **Jeremy Mayfield**, before **David Hyder** was hired to fill that role beginning at Dover. ➤ Robert Yates Racing signed a five-year extension with Ford, ending rumors that the team was

considering a manufacturer switch. RYR has been affiliated with Ford since **Robert Yates** became team owner in 1989. Even though RYR has struggled recently, the deal was good for both parties.

RYR would have been near the bottom of the pecking order at Chevrolet and no better off at Dodge or Toyota than it is now. Had Ford lost RYR, its only full-time Cup team would have been Roush Racing. ➤ The Cup series went more than a year without a rainout—until a storm postponed the May 5 race at Richmond. Then came a rainout the next weekend at Darlington and another weather postponement last Sunday at Dover. The fact all three were Car of Tomorrow races wasn't lost on Yates. "See, I'm not the only one who doesn't like the COT," Yates said. "God hates it, too."

Pit box

Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners.

Who will win at Pocono?

Roger: I'm still waiting for Tony Stewart to break through for his first win of the season, and Pocono looks like the place for it. Although Stewart has just one victory on the mountaintop, 11 of his 16 races at this track have been top 10 runs. It's time he turns that consistency into checkers and champagne spray. Please, Tony, if you win, that means Vinnie won't and neither will any of the Hendrick boys.

Vinnie: Denny Hamlin loves to use computer simulations to help his driving, and the virtual turned into reality with his breakout two-race sweep at Pocono last season. How can you pick against someone who has gone 2-for-2 in poles and victories in two Cup starts there? Sorry, Roger, but I expect the No. 11 FedEx Chevrolet to score me some major Pit points on Pennsylvania's tough, flat track.

- **Sleeper:** Clint Bowyer.
- **Not so fast:** Dale Earnhardt Jr.

- **Sleeper:** Brian Vickers.
- **Not so fast:** Greg Biffle.

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races):
Vinnie, 1,658; Roger, 1,570.



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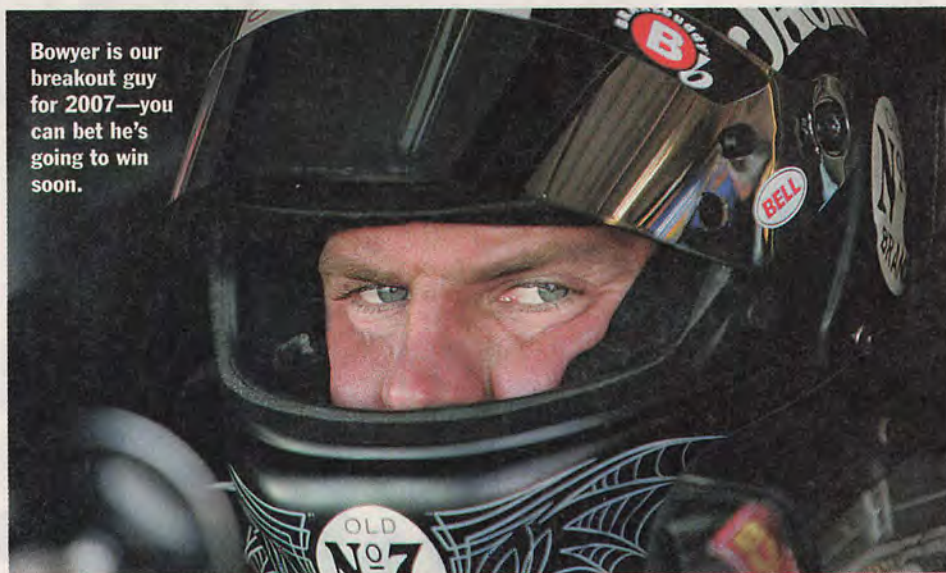
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NASCAR INSIDER

Who's got next?

Bowyer is our breakout guy for 2007—you can bet he's going to win soon.



ALAN MARLER / AP

How remarkable—or extraordinary—was Casey Mears' victory two weeks ago in the Coca-Cola 600? Consider these numbers:

From 2000 to 2002, there were 14 first-time winners in the Cup series. In the four-plus years since, there have been seven. In 2004, there were none.

It seemed as if your name wasn't Jimmie or Jeff ... Kurt, Kevin, Kasey or Kyle ... Tony, Matt or Greg ... or Dale ... you weren't headed for victory lane. (By the way, Mears is the first Casey to win a Cup race.)

Since 2003, 126 of the 156 Nextel Cup races have been won by 11 drivers. That's 81 percent.

And for a sport that strives for parity, it's not getting better. Since the start of 2006, 10 drivers have won 92 percent of the races (44 of 48), and five of those—Jimmie Johnson, Kevin Harvick, Kasey Kahne, Tony Stewart, Jeff Gordon and Matt Kenseth—have won 75 percent of them (36 of 48).

But enough about history. Now that Mears has his first win, who's next? A look at four winless drivers (through the first 12 races), ranked from most likely to least likely to get that big victory:

Clint Bowyer. He had a nifty rookie season in 2006 with four top five finishes and 11 top 10s, and SPORTING NEWS picked Bowyer as its breakout driver for 2007. He is 10th in points this season with five top 10 finishes in his first 12 races, and he drives for a strong team, Richard Childress Racing. It's just a question of when for Bowyer. His team can make it happen sooner by turning up its Car of Tomorrow program a

notch to compete on the same level as Hendrick Motorsports.

Martin Truex. A victory for Truex would be huge for Dale Earnhardt Inc., which is suffering from the impending departure of Dale Earnhardt Jr. Truex won Busch titles in 2004 and 2005 before moving up to Nextel Cup. He finished 19th in points as a rookie and is 16th now. He knows how to win and is hungry. Just listen to his scanner channel.

J.J. Yeley. The fastest palindrome in NASCAR posted his best Cup finish two weeks ago, coming in second to Mears in the Coca-Cola 600. There is a lot of pressure on Yeley because he drives for Joe Gibbs Racing, which has enjoyed long-term success with Tony Stewart and recent success with Denny Hamlin. Yeley is a member of the big rookie class from 2006. He finished 29th in points last year and is 15th this year. Working against Yeley is that he often tries too hard and forces the issue when he needs to be patient. But he has the tools to win.

Juan Pablo Montoya. He is NASCAR's most celebrated rookie. And he won't win a Cup race in 2007. Using an aggressive move—not that there's possibly anything wrong with that—Montoya won a Busch race on a road course in Mexico City. Since then, he has further infuriated friend and foe alike with his overly aggressive and inexperienced driving. If you think he will win one of the two Cup road races coming up, forget it. The list of drivers waiting to get even is long. And if you think he's ready to win on an oval, think again. —Bill Marx



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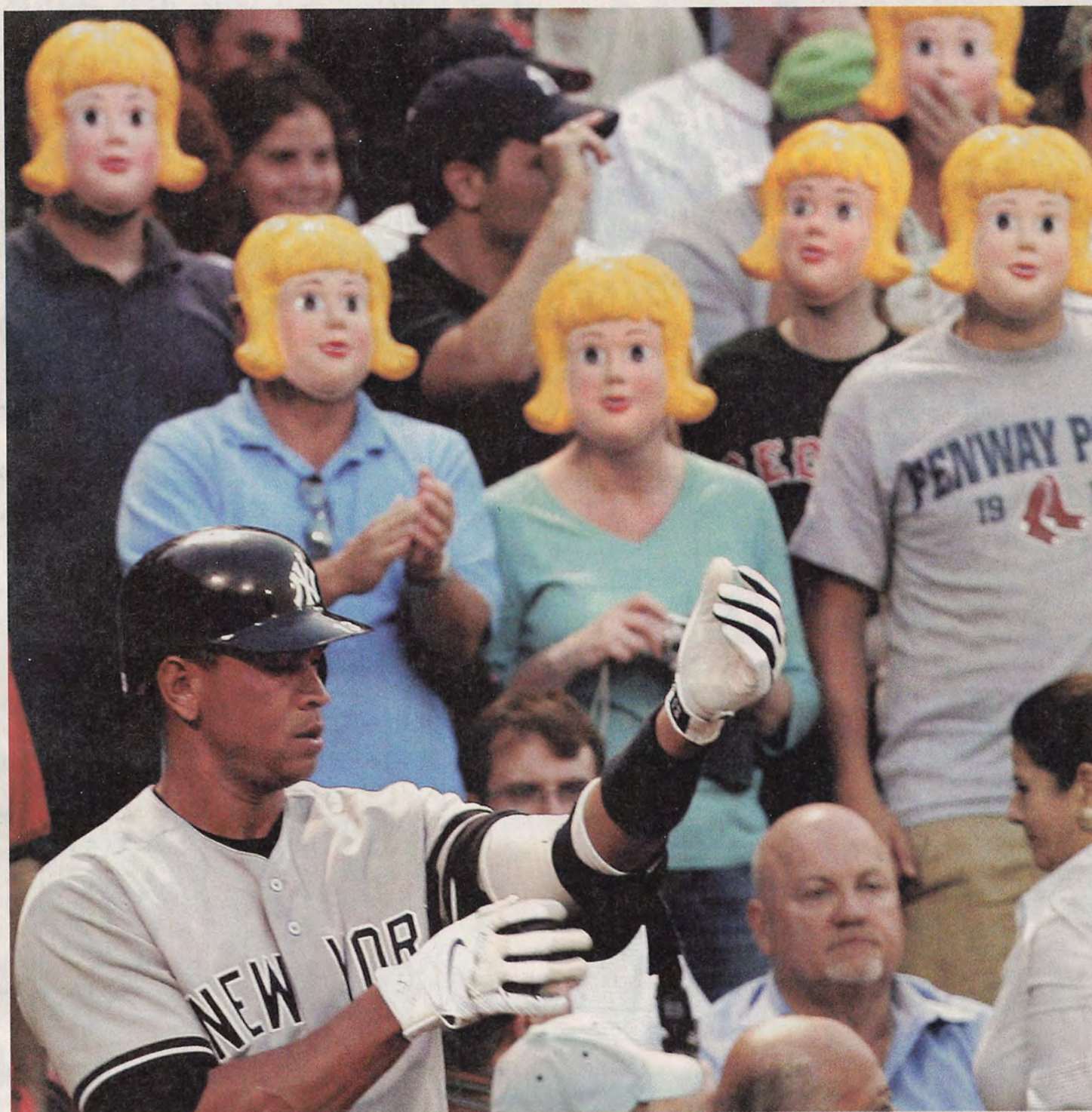
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That was no lady, that was a Red Sox fan. Tabloid-reading Fenway faithful—male and female—taunted Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez, whose female companionship was fodder for New York newspapers earlier last week. Boston fans got a read on the story, proof that love may be blind but rivalries are blonde.

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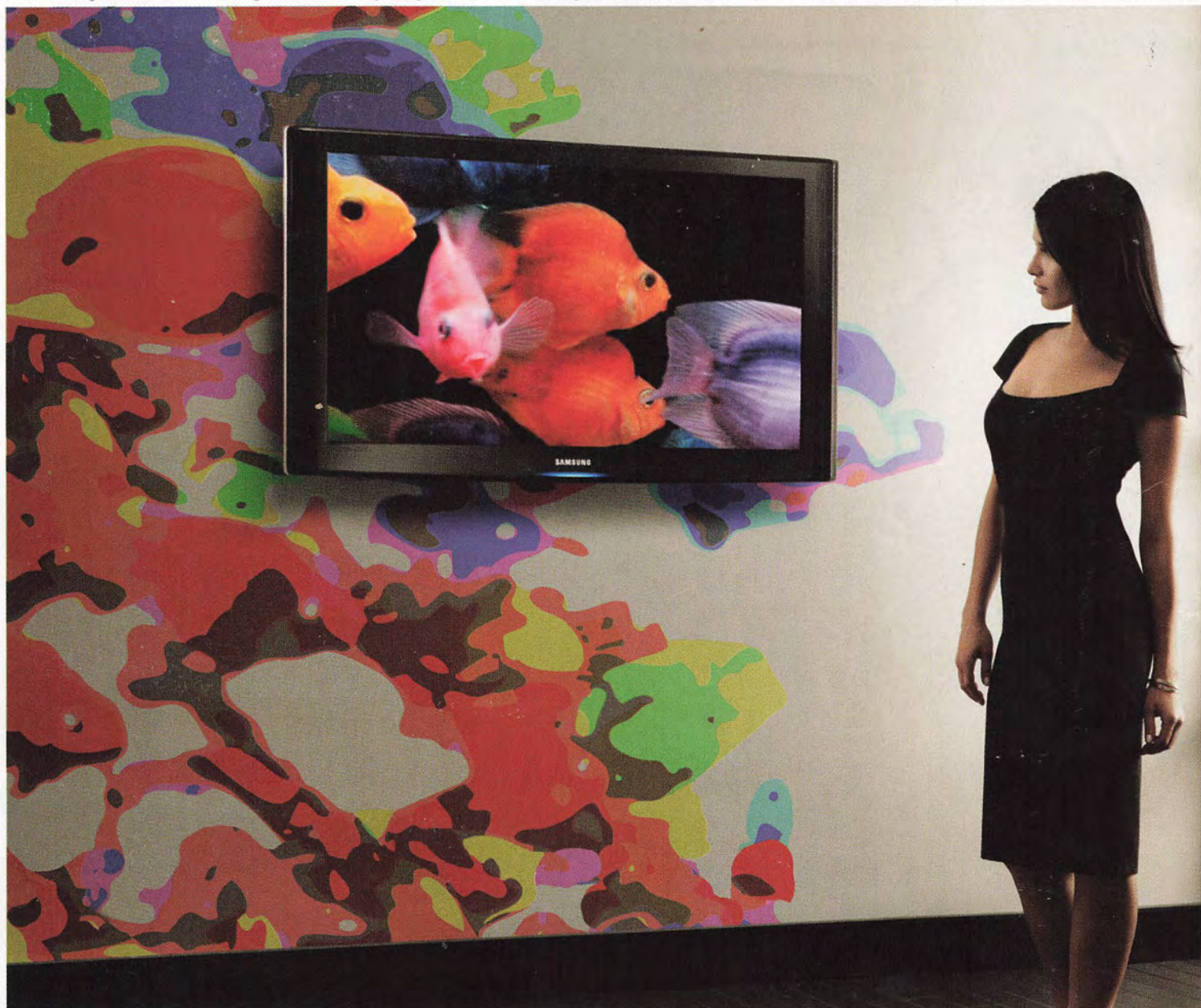
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